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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FRAGILE IDENTITIES: The Experiences of General Diploma Students and Their Teachers

by

MARGARET A. HARRIS

©

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled FRAGILE IDENTITIES: The Experiences of General Diploma Students and Their Teachers submitted by Margaret A. Harris in partial fulfilment of the requiements for the degree of Master of Education.

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Date: October 7, 1992

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of students and teachers in general diploma classes. A major part of this study was to investigate if the students were satisfied with the general diploma route, and if they felt that their general diploma classes were helpful in attaining their future goals. Also of interest were the teachers' understandings of general students, and if they liked teaching these classes. Looking at the experiences of students and teachers in the school setting can make an important contribution to teaching and learning processes of students.

The research was conducted in one rural secondary school in Alberta. Data were collected through participant observation, formal and informal interviews, questionnaires, and classroom observations. The study involved interviews with ten teachers who had experience teaching general diploma students. Questionnaires were given to all of the students registered in the general diploma English courses during both semesters - approximately 150 students. Formal interviews were also conducted with twelve students.

Analysis of the data indicated that there was a split between those teachers who enjoyed teaching general diploma students and those who did not. It appears that those teachers who were willing to give up some classroom control in order to form personal relationships with the students were the ones who enjoyed teaching these classes. Teachers who were concerned about maintaining control at all times or worried about how others would see them did not like teaching these classes.

The research suggests that general diploma students have problems associated with lower self-esteem, and much of what they say or do is related to protecting their

self-esteem. Academic ability is linked to one's self-worth, so choosing the general diploma route can adversely affect the student's self-esteem. In some schools there is also a stigma attached to being in a lower stream class. The results from this study indicate that the forming of personal relationships with the students helps to increase their self-esteem and also makes the school experience more rewarding for both the students and the teachers.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

All of us experience school. For some it is a pleasant and enjoyable experience, while for others it can be painful and boring. Why do students, even those in the same class, have such a wide variety of experiences? In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the exploration of these experiences. Although there has been a great deal of educational research based on curriculum, teaching and learning styles, achievement and testing, this research represents only a portion of what goes on in the classroom. Looking at the experiences of students and teachers in the school setting can make an important contribution to the teaching and learning processes of students. The meanings which students give to the school experience help to determine their actions with respect to work habits and relationships with other students and teachers (Martin, 1985b, p.93). In order to improve my own practice, I would like to gain a better understanding of the student experience, in particular the experiences of general diploma students.

Although I have taught a variety of courses over my nineteen years as a classroom teacher, during the past ten years I have mainly been teaching students in the general diploma route in English and social studies at a rural high school. General diploma students are often labelled as non-academic, potential drop outs, under achievers, at-risk students, or reluctant learners. However, some students do not fit any of those labels. While some may be in the general diploma route because they lack the academic ability to take the more advanced courses, others are there by choice. Depending upon the type of occupation they have chosen, some may need only a general diploma. Some want to get through high school as quickly as possible and with the minimum amount of work, while others have out of school commitments or problems that make it difficult to take the academic courses.

From my own experience, I know that these classes are not always the easiest to teach. Class sizes are often large, and there are more discipline problems and attendance problems in general diploma classes. I have had unpleasant experiences teaching general diploma classes. I have taught an English class of thirty in which fifteen of the students were severe discipline problems, a class of thirty-five social studies students in a room with only thirty-one desks, an English class that was composed of twenty seven boys and three girls, and a class in which four of the students were on probation for serious crimes. I have been frustrated with very capable students who attend classes sporadically or complete the minimal amount of work necessary to just pass. I have been angered at students who constantly disrupt the class and interfere with the learning of others. Sometimes it seems that there is nothing that I can do to motivate these students to take an interest in their education. Each year I find there are students that I am unable to reach or help in any way who eventually drop out of school before the semester is completed. Because I care about the students that I teach, I find this inability to help some students very frustrating.

On the other hand, I have had some very rewarding experiences teaching general diploma students. Recently I attended a community function where I met dozens of former students. After telling me about their families and jobs, many said how much they had enjoyed my classes. Although they could not remember specifically any of the material that I taught them, many thanked me for treating them like "real" people. Several said that they wished they would have listened when the teachers had told them that an education was important. A number who had dropped out of school were now up-grading their education. Although a few of the academic students that I had taught also talked to me, most of the positive comments came from those who had been in the general courses. For some teachers, maintaining contact with former students is one of the most rewarding aspects about teaching.

Because general students are open, honest and very willing to express their opinions, they can be "fun classes" for the teacher. Class discussions can be very enlightening and entertaining, especially when the students are relating stories from their personal lives. While they may not always have a firm grasp on the subject material, they are very willing to ask direct and informed questions that relate to the world around them. These students are often more worldly than the academic students because they have more domestic or employment related responsibilities. Because there is less pressure on the teacher for these students to do well academically, I find that I can take the time to explain things in detail, review the material more extensively, and make learning fun.

Over the years I have been able to establish a good working relationship with general diploma students, but I prefer to have a combination of general and advanced classes rather than only general classes. While there is less pressure on the teacher to produce academic results from the general students, there are different pressures because general diploma classes tend to become the catch-all for any student who does not fit into the academic mold. Returning drop outs, students with learning disabilities, students too old to be placed in junior high, students with severe emotional problems, and students with chronic attendance problems are combined with students of "average" academic ability. Dealing with such a wide range of abilities and behavioral characteristics can be a challenge for the teacher who must develop strategies that will both control the behavior of these students and motivate them to learn the material.

When I first started teaching general diploma courses a number of years ago, I didn't like either the courses or the students. After I realized that these courses were going to be a part of my teaching assignment for some time, I decided to make some changes in my teaching style and techniques that would make the experience less frustrating for me. While developing teaching strategies is important, I have also found that a key aspect in teaching general diploma students is the development of personal relationships between the teacher and the students. I have found that general students seem to need and want to form these personal relationships with the teacher. Although this often requires extra time and effort on the part of the teacher, I have found this to be a rewarding experience for me.

General students will phone me, stop by to visit and send me pictures of themselves and their children long after they have left my class. During the 1991-1992 academic year, I taught two general classes and two academic class until the Christmas break when I started my sabbatical leave. In early September, I started telling all my classes that I would be leaving before the semester was completed. When the time came to leave, my academic students barely said good-bye. The general students, on the other hand, gave me cards, letters, and gifts. Some were very upset and felt that I was abandoning them. On my visits to the school to conduct my research, the general students frequently stopped to talk with me, asking how my courses and research were going. While I have developed some personal contacts with academic students, they do not occur as often or last as long as the contacts established with the general diploma students.

Relationships are important to general diploma students possibly because they have not always been successful in school, and this is a way for them to increase their self esteem. Academic students, on the other hand, are more concerned with learning the required material and getting good grades than with developing a relationship with the teacher. Although the Department of Education has set out extensive curriculum guidelines on what material must be covered, it has been my experience that "what" we teach these students is not nearly as important as "how" we teach them.

General diploma students can be very vocal in expressing their opinions. When I first started discussing my research ideas with my classes, I referred to these classes as "non-academics" because that is usually how teachers, administrators and students refer to them. I was soon told that they did not want to be called non-academics because that defined them in terms of what they were not instead of what they were. After several discussions with students and teachers, I decided to refer to them as general diploma students. The students in my classes were very excited that I was going to do a research study about them because they said it made them feel important.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Much like a parent is concerned about the future of his/her child, I am concerned about the future of my students. I don't always know what the final outcome will be for the students that I teach, but I try to do what I think is best for them based on my many years of teaching and my own experience as a parent. However, I often wonder if we are providing general diploma students with a useful, quality education that will help them reach their goals. Do we treat these students as if they are less important than those in the academic classes? Why do so many of these students drop out of school? The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of students and teachers in general diploma classes. The focus of the study was to investigate the question: What is it like to be in a general diploma class? By better understanding the needs, wants, and goals of general diploma students and their teachers, I hoped to improve my own teaching practices to make the experience better for both the students and myself.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Prior to 1985, Alberta had a single high school diploma. Changes in 1985 in the Secondary Education in Alberta policy led to the current General Diploma and Advanced Diploma routes. According to the Alberta Program of Studies for Senior

High Schools, general diploma courses will be of interest to "students who are pursuing a General High School Diploma, many of whom will probably go directly into the work force." The Program of Studies also states that the more academic courses will be of interest to those students who are seeking an Advanced High School Diploma, and who will likely pursue post-secondary studies. Program rationale and philosophy for general diploma courses place the emphasis on the acquisition of practical life skills.

The research for this study was guided by the following questions:

1. What influences the student to take general diploma courses rather than those in an advanced route?
2. What are general diploma courses like?
3. Is the student satisfied with his/her choice?
4. Does the student feel that he/she is obtaining the necessary skills to be successful in the future?
5. How is the student treated by other students who are in an advanced route?
6. How do teachers experience these classes?
7. Do special strategies have to be developed to teach these classes?

PROCEDURES

I decided to do ethnographic research because it allows the researcher to enter into the lives of the persons being studied as naturally as possible to generate insights, explain events and seek understandings (Angus, 1986). However, as Spradley (1979, p.5) points out, ethnography goes beyond just the observation of behavior to inquire about the meaning behind the behavior. In order to understand both the students' and the teachers' interpretations of general diploma classrooms more fully, a number of data gathering techniques were necessary. For this study, I chose participant observation, questionnaires and informal and formal interviews to gather data.

Participant observation varies on a continuum from passive methods where the observer listens, watches and records, to a complete participation in the activities. For the first part of this study, I was a complete participant in the two general diploma courses that I was teaching. I observed the interactions in the classes, listened to students' stories and kept field notes on a regular basis. Later, when I was on a sabbatical leave from my school board, I observed other general diploma classes where my role varied from participant in the class discussions to strictly an observer.

I administered a pilot questionnaire to the general diploma classes that I was teaching. After revising the questionnaire, I administered it to all of the students enrolled in general diploma English classes. An open-ended questionnaire format was used to gather information from students about their reasons for being in a general diploma route and their satisfaction with the program.

The main data gathering method for this study was interviewing. Interviews were conducted over a four-month period with a number of teachers and students. Teachers were interviewed first about their understandings of general diploma students. Based on the responses from the student questionnaires and interviews of teachers, questions were formulated for the student interviews.

After the data was collected, I reviewed the material several times looking for common themes. I attempted to describe the themes in terms of the frame of reference of the participants and from my own experience with general diploma students.

Based on my experience as a teacher of general diploma classes, I had some preconceived ideas about what I would hear from the students and the teachers. I thought that students would be generally satisfied with the program they were in, but they would have specific complaints about "boring classes" or "boring teachers". I felt that most of these students would not have any future goals or plans other than to finish the course they were in. I expected to find that many general diploma students would have jobs or outside interests that were more important than their school work. From the teachers, I thought I would hear stories about how bad general diploma students could be and how the teachers disliked teaching these classes. While some of my pre-understandings were reinforced, I found that I gained new insights into how both teachers and students feel about general diploma classes.

ASSUMPTIONS

In conducting this study, I was aware of the following assumptions:

1. The experience of general diploma students is different than that of students in the advanced diploma route.
2. Students have meanings for aspects of school life that may be different from those held by teachers and administrators.
3. Students and teachers will be able to relate their experiences to a researcher.
4. Students will respond honestly to questionnaires and inquiries.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to one rural secondary school. The presence of the researcher in the classroom may have limited the amount of data gathered. The lack of researcher interview experience is also a limitation.

DELIMITATIONS

The study was concerned with those students who were currently enrolled in general diploma courses. Students who had been in the course and had already withdrawn before the questionnaires or the interviews were conducted were not included in the study. The school chosen for the study is a rural secondary school with a high school enrollment of 300. Some students may have switched from an advanced route to a general route during their high school years.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

General High School Diploma: allows students to graduate from high school, but does not meet university entrance requirements.

Advanced High School Diploma: allows students to graduate from high school with courses that can lead to university entrance.

Non-academic courses: courses which lead to a general diploma and are more practical in nature.

Academic courses: courses which usually lead to an advanced diploma and are necessary for university entrance.

At-Risk students: students who are likely to fail courses or to drop out of school.

Reluctant learner: students who have problems of motivation, attention, self-concept or who have not developed effective learning strategies.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The purpose of the research and the nature of the participation of the teachers and students was discussed with the administration of the school and all the participants involved before the research was started. A copy of the research proposal was made available to the administration and the teachers for their perusal. All teacher interview data was treated as confidential. Results of the analysis of the interviews with the teachers was presented to them before the written drafts were completed. All interpretations of the interview data was verified by the teachers allowing them the opportunity to make changes.

Student data was treated with the same confidentially. The identity of all students was kept confidential. Before any observations, questionnaires, or interviews were conducted, I explained the purpose of the research to the students. It was clearly explained to the students that participation in the study was voluntary, they did not have to participate if they chose not to do so, and they could withdraw at any time. Parents were informed of the study and given the opportunity to withhold their child from the study if they chose.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Traditionally in reasearch, there has been little input from the students about their own personal experiences in the school system. Because students are an integral part of the school culture, we should look more closely at the schooling experiences from their point of view. Campbell (1972) maintains that if you really want to learn about students and their experiences, you have to get to know them. Each bit of knowledge about students helps in making teaching decisions that affect those students.

In a teacher-as-researcher study conducted by Vulliamy and Webb (1991), teachers claimed that collecting the views and experiences of students had the greatest impact on their teaching because they were better able to understand the abilities and behaviors of these students. Thus, the significance of this study is to add to our understanding of what school life is like for students, in particular general diploma students. The study is an attempt to get at the subjective realities of students by listening to the voices from the classroom (Martin, 1985a).

Success is essential at all stages of life if growth and development are to take place (Hardy and McMurray, 1988, p.1). If we can gain a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a general diploma student, then we may be able to make the experience more rewarding and enjoyable for them. Teachers and administrators who deal with general diploma students may be interested in this study.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

This chapter outlines the nature of the study, its purpose and the research questions that guided the study. The design of the study is briefly covered including the limitations, delimitations and assumptions. The ethical procedures that were followed and the significance of the study are also discussed.

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature on streaming and the nature of streaming in Alberta schools. Also included in this chapter is a review of labelling theory and how students in the general diploma route are often labelled as: a) the underachiever, b) the minimally compliant student, c) the reluctant learner and d) the at-risk student.

Included in Chapter Three is a description of the design of the study, a description of the research context of the study, and a description of how the data was interpreted. The procedures used to gather data: participant observation, questionnaires, and interviewing are discussed.

Chapter Four is comprised of a detailed description and interpretation of the responses from both the teachers and the students on what general diploma classes are like. It is a compilation of all the data gathered into stories from their own experiences. These responses are categorized according to common themes that emerged from the observations and interviews.

Theming the stories of the teachers and students in an attempt to discover the lived experience is the focus for Chapter Five. My purpose was to see the general diploma classes from the understandings of the participants in those classes. Therefore, it was necessary to go beyond the responses and delve into the meaning behind the responses to get a complete view of what it is like to be a general diploma student.

The final chapter contains my reflections on the meaning of the study. Included are my reflections on the teacher-as-researcher experience. Based on my own personal reflections, suggestions for teaching general stream students in my own practice and at my school are included.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of general diploma students and their teachers. While some studies such as Martin's (1985a) Voices from the Classroom have looked at the student experience, there is very little literature available that deals specifically with the experiences of non-academic students. Therefore, I found it necessary to explore related areas. In Alberta, students are usually streamed into general diploma classes upon entering high school. Fortunately, there is a great deal of literature outlining the advantages and disadvantages of streaming. In investigating what type of student may be enrolled in a low stream route, I found that students were often labelled according to their academic ability or their behavior. Therefore, in this chapter I will provide a background to the types of students that may be in a general diploma class.

TRACKING/STREAMING

Tracking, as it is referred to in the United States, or streaming, which is the term used most frequently in Europe and Canada, was introduced as a way of individualizing instruction to students of differing abilities (Kulik & Kulik, 1982, p.424) by placing high ability and low ability students in separate classrooms (Byrne, 1990). High-track programs are tailored to meet the requirements of university entrance, while the emphasis in low-track programs is on practical skills (Byrne, 1990). Generally, low-track courses are designed to allow the student, upon completion of the program, to directly enter the work force.

For over seventy years, ability grouping has been a controversial issue in education because of its way of segregating students into an academic hierarchy (Slavin, 1990, p.471). According to Kulik and Kulik (1990), there is very little clear evidence that supports the effectiveness of ability grouping. In their study, Kulik and Kulik found that students in low ability classrooms did not accomplish a great deal. They maintain that academically deficient students learn just as much in mixed-ability classrooms as they did in homogeneous ones. However, they did find the students tended to have more positive attitudes about themselves and the school if they were with students of similar abilities which tends to support the concept of ability grouping. This study is in direct contrast to the findings of other researchers (Gregory & Smith, 1987; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Byrne, 1990) who conclude that streaming only benefits those students in a high stream while having damaging effects on those in the lower stream.

For higher ability students, this type of grouping may be more challenging and stimulating because teachers are able to adapt the instruction to suit their needs (Slavin, 1990). Gamoran and Berends (1987) found students in the top stream in the schools they studied tended to be more popular and were more willing to help and support each other. Students in low stream classes often made derogatory remarks toward those who made academic efforts. Since a pass was considered to be good enough, few aspired to achieve anything higher.

Gregory and Smith (1987) feel that there is little value in streaming because it perpetuates class distinctions and reinforces cliques among students by pitting segments of the student population against one another. Low stream students perceive themselves as less capable academically, and streaming reinforces these differences. Ability grouping in elementary school creates a label that communicates stigma (Byrne, 1990, p.174) which may produce feelings of indifference, alienation and resistance among these students by the time they reach high school (Sedlack et al., 1986). Studies have shown that low stream high school students are more prone to delinquency, absenteeism, dropping out of school, and social problems (Slavin, 1990).

In Gamoran and Berends' (1987) study, students reported differences in teacher treatment and disciplinary climate between the streams. In the higher stream classes, a greater proportion of time was spent on instruction, there was less time off task, and teachers expected students to complete more homework. In lower stream classes, instruction was simplified and proceeded more slowly, the work was more structured, and teachers expected less of the students. Many teachers reported more disciplinary problems in the lower stream classes. Gamoran and Berends note that reducing the pace and complexity of a lesson may be used as a technique for controlling students rather than gearing the instruction to the ability levels of the students.

Teachers tend to view low stream classes negatively (Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Byrne, 1990; Slavin, 1990), seeing them as frustrating to teach. Most teachers in these studies preferred teaching high stream classes because the students are more oriented towards academic achievement. The more experienced teachers or those who are regarded as more successful are often assigned the high stream courses leaving the less experienced and less successful teachers to teach the lower stream classes (Slavin, 1990, p.473). Thus, low stream students may receive a lower quality of instruction. Dillon (1989) found that some teachers in low stream programs have classroom environments that deter rather than encourage learning by promoting the low stream student's minimal educational goals. Mclaren (1980) believes that it is the low stream students who need the best teachers. However, in some schools, teachers compete against one another to obtain the more advanced classes (Gamoran & Berends) which can produce an elitist atmosphere within the school. Gamoran and Berends also found that prolonged exposure to low stream classes demoralized teachers and adversely affected their competencies.

In their research, Gamoran and Berends were able to find only one study in which students and teachers spoke positively of their experiences in low stream programs. Students at three American Catholic schools favored the remedial instruction found in low stream programs. It may be that not enough ethnographic research has been completed dealing with the experiences of low stream students and their teachers. Much of the research that has been completed deals with academic standards in quantitative terms rather than the experiences of the people involved (Gamoran and Berends, 1987).

STREAMING IN ALBERTA HIGH SCHOOLS

Whereas some systems for streaming are very rigid, allowing students very little program choice (Kulik & Kulik), in Alberta the concept of ability grouping or streaming is more flexible. Upon entering grade ten, a student can chose an Advanced High School Diploma route, which can lead to university entrance, or a General High School Diploma route, which can lead directly to the work force or entrance into a technical institution. According to the Alberta Program of Studies, the different routes commensurate with differing abilities, interests and aspirations and are designed to enable students to have success in school.

In the school being studied, there is no set streaming policy. Through the use of counseling and parent-teacher conferences, students are encouraged to choose the route that relates most to their academic ability, future plans and educational goals. The final decision is left to the student and his/her parents. This decision is extremely important as it often requires a great deal of time and effort to change routes. As Gamoran and Berends (1987, p.421) note, there is little movement between program routes, and when movement occurs, it is usually downward. Students often move from the more academic classes to the less academic as they proceed through high school, but it is much more difficult to move the other way. Students who want to pursue a university education should be in the Advanced Diploma route.

Unfortunately, there are still students who do not understand this and think that they can meet university entrance requirements even though they are in the general route.

How do students end up in a General Diploma Route?

Although students are often stereotyped and labelled according to the route they choose (Smith, 1989), there is a multiplicity of student types in the general diploma route. Students come to this route from a variety of schooling experiences. Even though they may be approximately the same age, their academic abilities and work habits vary considerably (Sedlack et al., 1986). Rather than make generalizations about one type of general diploma student, it is necessary to listen to the flow of information from students to find out about their school experiences (Widlake, 1983).

HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND THE GENERAL STUDENT?

In order to increase the efficiency of the education system, educators and psychologists developed methods to classify students by intellectual, physical, or emotional characteristics (Apple, 1971). This became known as labelling theory. According to Apple, labels were originally designed to reduce waste, speed up the rate of production, and increase the value of the output of schools. Unfortunately, labels can also be used as a form of social control because they allow those who are labelled to be devalued in society by cutting them off from others without the same stigma (Wells & Allan, 1990). Often the people doing the labelling, teachers, administrators, psychologists, and counselors, are under the comforting illusion that the designated students are being helped (Apple, 1971).

On the other hand, when doing qualitative research in a school, labels can be of some use. Just as we develop stereotypes to make our lives simpler, we also construct labels to be able to negotiate everyday life. Becker (1963) feels that labels are not necessarily always negative. Labels can help us to make sense out of the behavior of others which is an important aspect of both the teaching process and the research process. However, teachers and researchers should be aware of how labelling theory affects our reading of these labels.

Even though a student may not have been given a formal label, placement in a low stream class is often enough to result in serious consequences for the student. Some teachers expect poorer performances from students in lower stream classes which can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the student (Kelly, 1977). Placement in lower stream classes and attaching labels to students may often result in lower self-esteem and poorer academic performance (Kelly, 1977). Once a person is labelled a certain way, it influences not only how we see them, but also how we react to them. Although there is not much research literature available that relates specifically to non-academic students, there are several studies that refer to characteristics that may be helpful in describing general diploma students. In order to gain a better understanding of what the general diploma experience can be like, it is necessary to have a more indepth look at some of the labels that have been attached to these students by teachers, administrators and researchers.

The Under Achiever

An individual's attributions for past success or failure have important influences on future achievement outcomes (Farmer & Vispoel, 1990, p.127). Farmer and Vispoel contend that poor performance and decreased persistence on a task results when one believes that failure is inevitable. For students who believe they lack ability, failure in similar situations seems likely which results in what Farmer and Vispoel refer to as learned helplessness. Students may no longer want to attempt a task because they feel that they will fail.

Some students attempt to protect and enhance their self-esteem by taking credit for their successes while denying any responsibility for failure (Skaalvik, 1990). Skaalvik found that students attribute success to internal factors such as ability or effort and failure to external factors such as luck or task difficulty. Students associated external attributions with the quality of teaching, how interesting the school subjects were, the mood of the teachers and fatigue or sickness (Frieze & Snyder, 1980, p.187). Frieze and Snyder found that one's attributions or beliefs about the causes of success and failure were a good indicator of performance. Because self-esteem is strongly associated with success, poor achievers often attribute poor results to lack of effort rather than lack of ability.

The Minimally Compliant Student

Many of the students in general diploma classes fall into the category of the minimally compliant student. These are students who want to secure a high school diploma through minimal compliance with whatever is necessary to earn the credential (Sedlack et al., 1986). Their goal is to achieve the credential rather than to gain general knowledge. They want to know what it is that they have to do to make it day to day and to pass the required courses (Dillon, 1989). A typical question from this type of student would be: Is this going to be on the test? They are not interested in learning for the sake of learning as a more academic student may be. If some material is being presented by the teacher that is not going to be on the test, it will be of little or no interest to these students. They want to learn only enough to pass the course (Martin, 1985b).

A minimally compliant student's engagement in academic learning is directly influenced by the extent to which receiving a high school diploma is viewed as having educational, personal or economic value to the student (Sedlack et al., 1986). Other factors than academic ability are more important to the self-esteem for these students (Byrne, 1990), and as noted previously, self-esteem greatly influences how a student does in school. General diploma students are often preoccupied with social activities, romantic involvements, or sports. They are able to assess the potential value of the alternatives for investing time and effort into educational pursuits and are willing to live with their choice of minimal compliance (Sedlack et al., 1986).

As Dillon (1989, p.233) points out, teachers often enjoy teaching the minimally compliant student because they are open, direct and honest about their goals. Although it may be frustrating for some teachers to teach these students, they are rarely a discipline problem. They choose their behavior, but they may behave differently in different situations (Albert, 1989). These students are often capable of handling a more academic program so when they find a course that is useful to them, they have the ability to do very well. Minimally compliant students may also be ones who keep trying despite past academic failure (Dillon, 1989).

The goal for many compliant students is to complete school as quickly as they can so they can enter the work force. Thus, they prefer practical courses that will give them skills that may be useful in finding a job. Simmons and Wade (1984) note that getting a job is a normal and natural aspiration. It is not necessary for all students to aspire to a university education. According to Albert (1989), the key interaction in dealing with this type of student is to determine what students expect from us and what we expect from them.

The Reluctant Learner

Another label applied to lower stream students is the "reluctant learner". Cohen and deBettencourt (1991) define a reluctant learner as "a student who is difficult to teach due to problems related to motivation, attention, self-concept or inefficient learning strategies." (p. 265) The early warning signs of a reluctant learner which may be visible in elementary school include: school avoidance, discipline problems, repeated failure, difficulty processing information, motivation problems, and poor self-concept (Cohen and deBettencourt, 1991). Habits of learning are developed in elementary school, and students who have a poor self-image or who feel stupid, dumb or incompetent continue the reluctance for learning into high school (Martin, 1980). Some reluctant learners have had frightening or embarrassing experiences in school or have been subjected to insensitive teachers or classmates (Jackson, 1968). Cohen and deBettencourt found that the aspiration level for these students diminishes with each year resulting in the reluctant learner, over time, becoming the at-risk student.

Because of early experiences in school or the influence of the attitudes family and friends have towards learning, some students develop an indifference to academic learning (Sedlack et al., 1986). Sedlack goes on to warn that in the future we may have classrooms full of indifferent and disaffiliated students who invest their time and energy elsewhere rather than on learning unless we make an attempt to provide instruction that is more useful to them.

Reluctant learners are not interested in being in school. Most are there because they must be, either due to government regulations or parental pressure. Many of these students lack a sense of purpose for their lives and, as a result, are less motivated to work. For some there is little or no reinforcement from home. Students who do not see the benefit of education reflected by their parents, do not see the relevance of school for themselves (Dillon, 1989). The fear of failure is a fear for their self-image so they seek alternative means of establishing self-esteem (Cohen & deBettencourt, 1991). As with the minimally compliant students, the reluctant learners are concerned with out of school activities such as employment, social activities or sports. What they do outside of school is far more important to them than what they do in school (McLaren, 1980).

One of the problems that reluctant learners have is being unable to attribute academic success or failure to their own effort and skill. Dichter (1989) and Cohen and deBettencourt (1991) found that low achieving students have false expectations or unrealistic expectations regarding their own ability. They set unrealistic goals for themselves, either impossibly high or ridiculously low. These students will deny responsibility for their failure by blaming the teacher, the subject matter, the school system, their parents or their peers for their lack of success (Frieze & Snyder, 1980).

Whereas teachers often reported that they liked to teach compliant students because they are open and honest about their educational goals (Dillon, 1989), dealing with the reluctant learner is more difficult. The reluctance to learn results in behavior and discipline problems. Because of their tendency to avoid school and their lack of motivation, teachers find that they must develop strategies to help prevent the reluctant learner from becoming the drop out (Cohen & deBettencourt, 1991). Reluctant learners may be one reason why teachers tend to view low stream classes negatively (Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Byrne, 1990; Slavin 1990), seeing them as difficult and frustrating to teach.

Widlake (1983) points out that one of the problems contributing to an increasing number of reluctant learners is that schools are no longer the only source of learning. The increased use of TV, the VCR, and the personal computer has resulted in a media generation which wants rewards without effort (McLaren, 1980). Students, over-stimulated by TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, movies and advertisements, become restless, finding it oppressive to sit in packed classrooms in slow moving institutions (McLaren, 1980). The more academic students have the same stimulus, but because they have more defined educational goals, they are better able to cope with this situation. Dichter (1989) feels that the major problem associated with reluctant learners is a lack of a sense of purpose.

The At-Risk Student

The at-risk student is one who is in danger of failing or of dropping out of school (Sedlack et al., 1986). In general diploma classes, there are always students who drop out before the end of the term. Some start the course several times but drop out each time. Rumberger (1987, p.109) cites many reasons why students drop out of school including: poor academic achievement in school, as measured by grades, test scores and grade retention, and behavioral problems such as absenteeism, truancy, and discipline problems. He found that the process of disengagement from school was associated with lower levels of self-esteem, less sense of control over their lives than other students, and lower educational and occupational aspirations.

Dillon (1989) found that at-risk students had negative attitudes toward school, poor self-esteem, low reading and writing abilities, and engaged in language and actions that were not acceptable in school settings. At-risk students had little parental support or involvement in the school. Absenteeism was high among the students that Dillon studied either because they had to work to supplement family incomes or because of their uncaring attitude towards school.

Because at-risk students perceive themselves as less capable academically, they place little value on academic attainment (Byrne, 1990). When they fall behind in a course, they become frustrated. this frustration often leads to discipline problems and, for some, dropping out of school. Sometimes these students have been told in subtle ways that they are insignificant (Gregory & Smith, 1987) which results in lower self-esteem and self-confidence. At-risk students feel powerless to influence their environment (Frieze & Snyder, 1980). What they do in school is not connected to what they do outside of school so they see little relevance in learning. Simmons and Wade (1984) maintain that at-risk students lack a sense of purpose. Their main desire is to enjoy life to the fullest while they can.

Martin (1985b) contends that the purpose of schooling is to prepare the student for life. Learning to interact in an acceptable manner with other people is preparation for a job and an essential part of learning to live in society. According to Wentzel (1991), "the implicit goal of education is to socialize children into society by instilling in them the value of dependability, punctuality and obedience in conjunction with learning the course material (p.2)." In Wentzel's study, low achieving students reported rarely trying to earn approval from others or trying to be dependable and responsible. Wentzel feels that social responsibility is highly associated with school performance. Irresponsible behavior results in classroom disorder or poor interpersonal relationships which puts the student at risk for academic failure.

Wentzel found that behaving in responsible ways was a critical student characteristic which contributed to learning and performance. Students who learned the appropriate social responses such as attending class and following instructions had significant gains in academic achievement. Acceptance by teachers and peers was also related to academic achievement. Socially rejected and aggressive students were those most at risk for failure. Peer rejection is closely related to antisocial behavior. Wentzel also found that antisocial and aggressive behavior in the early grades was a strong predictor of dropping out in high school.

Behaving in an irresponsible manner can severely detract from learning. Teachers treat socially irresponsible students negatively (Wentzel, 1991). These students receive less one-on-one help which contributes to their feelings of powerlessness. Houghton et al. (1988) surveyed secondary classroom teachers to determine what behaviors they found most troublesome. Teachers felt that inappropriate talking, hindering other children, and idleness were the major problems. Houghton's study also found that boys were more of a problem than girls and at-risk students were more of a problem than other students. In the school I studied, there were significantly more boys in the general diploma classes than girls.

Despite the concern for at-risk students and drop outs, Rumberger (1987, p.112) feels that dropping out may be beneficial both for some students as well as for the school they attend. Students who are not willing to get anything out of school may find alternatives that can be more rewarding for them. At-risk students who remain in school can be disruptive to the students who want to be there to learn. However, most studies show that dropping out of school has negative individual and social consequences (Wentzel, 1991). Society as a whole suffers due to unemployment and increased demands on social services. Studies show that drop outs have lower academic skills which makes it more difficult for them to find steady employment or hinders them obtaining additional education or training to make them competitive in the job market (Rumberger, 1987).

Do labels help or hinder us?

While teachers may feel that they are assisting both themselves and the students when they assign labels, Albert (1989, p.22) warns that the use of labels transmits negative or positive expectations to others so teachers should be cautious about labelling students in general diploma courses. He feels that lower stream students misbehave more often to seek extra attention because they don't know how to ask for attention appropriately. Misbehaving may be a bid for power or attention, or it may a method used to cover up a disability. It is important for teachers to distinguish disabilities from power behavior. Students with disabilities may display particularly poor behavior during testing situations because tests have such a powerful impact on self-esteem.

Labelling students may help us make sense out of their behavior, but labelling may be useful only as a starting point in the process of educating lower stream students. When labelling becomes stereotyping of low stream students into specific categories that have negative stigmas, it can have detrimental effects on the students.

Once a person is stigmatized by a label, others perceive and respond to the person in a particular way (Gove, 1980). It becomes difficult for the person to break out of the label which can have damaging effects on the person's self-esteem. While labels give us a reference point from which to begin helping students, in dealing with general diploma students we should try to go beyond the label to see each student as an individual. Responding only to the label and not to the person as an individual can hinder us from making the educational experience more rewarding for the lower stream students.

Student Masks

Teachers are not the only people who use labels in the classroom. Students label teachers regularly. In addition they apply labels to other members of their class and to themselves. This process of self-labelling may be linked to the use of masks as self-imposed labels. Smith (1989, p.28) contends that students develop and wear masks to cover their inadequacies. She refers to masks of helplessness, invisibility, boredom, contempt, illness, vulnerability, apathy, the victim and the class clown. In order to survive in school, students find ways of protecting themselves to avoid humiliation, loss of face, criticism from teachers or parents or the feeling of failure. Teachers, especially those of general diploma classes, are familiar with students who hide behind these types of masks.

Most teachers would be able to identify a number of these students in their classes. Smith maintains that these masks are a subterfuge that helps to protect the students, but also makes them feel worse about themselves and may interfere with their ability to learn. These students are often labelled by others as lazy, willful or poorly disciplined and appear to be bored, tired or funny. What they may really be covering up by hiding behind these masks are reading or comprehension problems which have caused them to take the lower stream classes.

According to Smith, the student hiding behind the mask has been made to feel stupid at sometime in his/her schooling experience. Smith goes on to say that these masks can only be removed when students reach a certain comfort level in the classroom. She feels that it is important to teach these students in ways that will help them to succeed. Teachers of general diploma students need to be aware of the different problems students may be hiding in order to help them be successful.

STUDENT/SCHOOL INTERACTION

Success is essential at all stages of life for growth and development to take place (Hardy & McMurray, 1988; Smith, 1989). Academic ability is related to self-esteem and, if a student experiences failure in school or the fear of failure, those feelings are translated into failure as a person. Hardy and McMurray feel that it is possible to improve students' perceptions of themselves by providing situations in which students can achieve success. Martin (1980) agrees that success is important, but that it can not be artificially supplied by the teacher. Success at school involves more than academic learning. Students must be given the opportunities to develop enough courage to take risks (Hardy and McMurray, 1988).

Cohen and deBettencourt (1991) contend that the goal in dealing with at-risk students should be to intervene early enough and appropriately enough to prevent school disengagement. Teachers should endeavor to establish classroom environments which reduce resistance to learning and increase active participation in the lessons to help these students feel good about themselves and their ability to learn (Dillon, 1989, p.238). In order to enhance a student's self-esteem, it is necessary to accept the student for who he/she is without letting the background of the student get in the way of the teacher-student relationship (McLaren, 1980).

There isn't enough practical education for students, especially those in the general diploma program (Martin, 1985b). Since the goal of these students is to join the labor force as soon as they can, they need to have practical and useful skills that will prepare them for the working world. Martin feels there should be more coordination between school subjects and careers. Schools need to provide students with more subjects that will assist them with their occupational goals. The subject matter in general diploma courses should be geared more to the students' lives as this type of student responds best to things that relate to them and the world around them (Campbell, 1972; Gregory & Smith, 1987).

VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM

Curriculum and achievement represent only a part of the life of a high school student. Another important aspect of schooling, the experiences of students and teachers in the school setting, has been overlooked by researchers (Martin, 1985a). Jackson (1968) notes that school may be "painful and dull for some while being pleasurable and exciting for others." (p.44) Listening to the voices of the participants in the school setting can contribute to the teaching-learning processes of the students. Meanings that students have for school rules, homework, and the curriculum may be different than those that the teachers and administrators have (Martin, 1985a). Listening to the views from the classroom will help to fill the gap in our knowledge about general diploma students and may help teachers and administrators develop aims and strategies for these students that will be more relevant for them (Martin, 1985a).

REFLECTIONS ON THE LITERATURE

When I started my research on the experiences of non-academic students and their teachers, I found very little literature that dealt specifically with this area. I found it necessary to explore related areas to find information that referred to non-academic or general diploma students. While there has been a great deal of research which shows the advantages and disadvantages of streaming or tracking, I didn't want to concentrate totally on that aspect because I felt that the streaming process in rural Alberta is much different from that outlined in the research literature which is predominantly from the United States and Europe. In England and in the United States, streaming occurs frequently at the lower grades and is often associated with social class (Kelly, 1977). The concept of streaming in Alberta is more flexible and allows more program choice compared to the more rigid systems commonly used in England and the United States. In the school being studied, the students have the final choice in which stream they will enter in grade 10. They may choose the advanced or the general stream or a combination of both. Because of this freedom of choice, I felt that many of the concepts traditionally associated with streaming did not apply to this study so I did not want to limit myself to a discussion only on the advantages or disadvantages of streaming.

From my own experience I have found that problems associated with self-esteem appear to be a major factor for students in general diploma classes. The literature available tends to support this view, particularly in cases where students are stigmatized by negative labels. If we are to improve the quality of education for all students, then we need to be aware of the consequences that labelling has on students. Students often try to hide their real feelings behind masks in order to protect their self-esteem. After reviewing the literature on student masks and the effects of labelling, I was interested to find out if the students at this school had experienced any of the negative stigmas that are associated with labels. I was also interested in the teachers' understandings of labelling and student masks.

Although there has been an increasing interest on the part of researchers to explore the lived experiences of the participants in the classroom setting, there is still not a great deal of literature available in this area. I felt that listening to the voices from the general diploma classrooms may provide us with a deeper insight into the experiences of these students and their teachers, thereby allowing us the opportunity to make the experience more rewarding for all those involved.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of students within the general diploma route. By listening to the voices of the students, I wanted to find out why they were in the general diploma route, if they were satisfied with the program, and if this program was preparing them to reach their future plans and goals. I also wanted to find out how teachers of general diploma classes felt about teaching these classes, and what their understandings of general diploma students were.

This study was conducted using a case study approach. I entered the natural setting of the school in an effort to gain an understanding of the experiences of students in general diploma classes. According to Yin (1984), the case study method investigates a phenomenon in a real life setting through the use of a number of data gathering methods. Spradley (1980, p.10) defines this type of research as ethnography which is based on the assumption that knowledge of all cultures is valuable. In order to study the culture of the general diploma classroom, I chose participant observation, questionnaires, and informal and formal interviews to gather data.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

a) Setting

The setting for this study was a small rural secondary school in Alberta where I had been teaching for the past eighteen years. The school is composed of approximately 600 students from grades seven to twelve with a high school population of 300 students. The teaching staff is comprised of thirty-six full and part-time teachers, most of whom teach both junior and senior high courses.

Upon entering high school, students have a choice of two program routes. Students who plan to attend university or other post-secondary institutions take the advanced diploma route while students who plan to enter the job market upon completion of grade twelve usually take the general diploma route. Students receive counseling before entering grade ten outlining the possible alternatives for them based on their future plans and goals. The final decision for program selection is left to the student and his/her parents.

b) Participants

For the participant observation portion of this study, I selected the English 23 and Social Studies 13 classes that I was teaching during the first semester. I observed the students' behavior and the classroom interactions, and held informal chats with the students. I kept field notes based on my observations and what the students were telling me. I administered questionnaires to the first semester English 13, 23, and 33 classes.

During the second semester, when I was on a sabbatical leave, I observed general diploma classes in a variety of subject areas on a weekly basis over a four month period. I administered a revised questionnaire to students in the English 13, 23, and 33 classes. During this time, I asked for student volunteers to be interviewed. From this list of volunteers, I selected 12 students who I interviewed formally. Because I was interviewing these students during their regular class time, I conducted only one interview with each student. I also conducted informal interviews with students in several math and science general diploma classes during my observations of those classes. Twice I was able to observe teachers lead a class discussion on what it is like to be in a general diploma class.

During the first semester, I discussed my research ideas with several of my colleagues. From these discussions, I was able to formulate several of the questions that I would later ask in the formal interviews with the teachers. I interviewed ten teachers who had experience teaching general diploma students. I interviewed each of these teachers once and summarized the content of the interviews. I then discussed the summaries with the teachers to see if they wished to make any changes.

PROCEDURES

a) Observing my own teaching

Participant observation allows the researcher to enter into the lives of the persons being studied as naturally as possible to generate insights, explain events and seek understandings (Angus, 1986). Although this method of data gathering does create some disruption for the participants, it is less intrusive and disruptive than some other data gathering techniques. Participant observation varies from passive methods where the observer listens, watches, and records information to complete participation in the activities (Spradley, 1980, p.58). The greatest advantages of participant observation are that it is a way to study behavior and interactions in a natural setting, and it is a valuable way of gathering data that is unavailable through other collection methods (Stainback & Stainback, 1989). However, Stainback and Stainback do caution that if the researcher is becoming a full participant, problems may arise due to the social routine and realities of the classroom that may limit the amount of time spent on research.

Dobbert (1984) feels that it is easier to talk to participants if the researcher is involved in the activities. An increased comfort level between the researcher and the participant will produce greater validity and reliability of the data collected to give a more rounded picture of the situation. He feels that a disadvantage of participant observation is that the researcher may become too close to the participants which may cloud his/her objectivity of the study. Britzman (1991, p. 13) suggests that listening to the personal voices from the classroom allow us to enter their world, but re-presenting their voices is more than a recording of their words. Britzman maintains that retelling another's story can only be a partial telling since stories are selective and partial on the part of the participant and the researcher. The participant may decide to tell only what he/she is comfortable with, and the researcher may be selective in the retelling process.

For the participant observation portion of this study, my own involvement ranged from passive to complete participation. From September to December, 1991, I was a complete participant observer in two general diploma classes that were part of my teaching assignment during that term. I observed the interactions in the classroom, listened to students' anecdotes and stories and recorded field notes on a regular basis. During this time, I began to formulate questions to use in the later stages of the research.

I soon found out that there was a tension created when teaching and doing research at the same time. As Spradley (1980), Stainback and Stainback (1989), and Dobbert (1984) note, there are some disadvantages to being a complete participant. I found that because of the responsibilities associated with teaching, I did not always have time to record specific events as they happened. I had to rely on my ability to recall the situation as closely as I could. It was impossible to tell everything that happened as Britzman (1991) points out.

From January to April, 1992, I was a less active participant in a variety of general diploma classes. In some of these classes, I sat at the back of the room, observed and recorded the interactions. In others I was involved in the class discussions or activities which gave me the opportunity to talk to individual students. I was able to gather more data than I had as a complete participant because I had more time to record information, and I was not as directly involved with the other participants.

During this time, I was able to observe two teachers conduct class discussions with their general diploma classes based on their personal experiences in general classes. I did not have access to recording equipment that was sensitive enough to record the group conversations, but I was able to take short form notes. Both teachers were familiar with and interested in my study, so they were able to lead the discussion while I observed and listened. I found the students very willing participants allowing me to collect some interesting data.

b) Interviewing colleagues

Survey interviewing has long been a dominant methodology for interview research in the social and behavioral sciences. In recent years, with the emergence of qualitative research paradigms, it has also become an accepted methodology in educational research. The goal of research interviewing is to provide a framework where respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms (Stainback and Stainback, 1989). As a qualitative methodology which attempts to observe people and events as they happen and in natural settings (Measor, 1985, p.67), it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, feelings and memories than one could achieve through observation alone (Parker, 1984).

Research interviewing is conversation with a purpose (Smith, 1975); the purpose being to gather valid information pertinent to the research study. Herein lies one of the major problems with interviewing. The informant becomes the object of the interviewer's interest. There is the potential for abuse or betrayal for both the interviewer and the participant (Weber, 1986, p.65). The interviewer may ignore the rights and feelings of the participant in order to get the information. What may start out as private and confidential may become very public (Weber, 1986) if the information is included in a formal written document. The participant may give false or distorted information if he/she does not feel comfortable in the situation. Thus, to develop deeper understanding, there must also be the development of trust and commitment between the interviewer and the participant.

Why do people agree to be interviewed? I was very fortunate to already have relationships established with all of the teachers that I interviewed. All were colleagues, some of whom I had known and worked with for over fifteen years. I talked to each teacher several times informally before I conducted the interviews to inform them of the purpose of my study and to try to reach an understanding about how they would benefit from the interview. Basically, the main benefit for each teacher was to gain a deeper understanding of his/her own practice through dialogue with another person.

Whereas a questionnaire relies on written responses, the interview does not require the respondents to be able to read and write (Parker, 1984). It opens up a whole range of possible responses that may not be available from a questionnaire alone. The research interview may be very structured or minimally structured depending on the individual researcher and the type of information to be gathered (Stainback and Stainback, 1989). A researcher may interview people very informally by carrying on a friendly conversation to produce some research questions in a natural and non-threatening manner, or the researcher may have a very structured format of questions to ask (Stainback and Stainback, 1989). In my own experience, what started as informal conversation often resulted in joint reflection. Many times a person is not aware of his/her own hopes, fears, feelings, or perceptions until he/she thinks about them and verbalizes them. I soon discovered that teachers share many of the same experiences but are unaware that they do so.

Three communication components of an interview are: language, frame of reference, and conceptual level of questions (Smith, 1975, p.171). Because the role of language is very important to the interview, the interviewer and the respondent must have a shared vocabulary. Oversimplified or overly difficult questions tend to lower the respondent's motivation to communicate (Smith, 1975). The interviewer must have an idea of the language people use. The interviewer must also realize that everyone's frame of reference is different, and the questions may be interpreted from different points of view which will have an effect on the material gathered. Depending on the conceptual level of the question, the respondent may have difficulty in answering the question. Answers also depend on the way that the question is formulated, and answers may be affected by who asks the questions.

Because we have worked together in the past and share many of the same experiences, I found that there were few problems with language or the concepts used in the questions I asked the teachers. Occasionally, I found it necessary to elaborate or clarify questions by giving examples of possible responses that others had given. When interviewing the students, I found that I had to adjust the vocabulary of my questions to their level, and I had to clarify more of the questions by giving a range of possible answers. I tried to formulate the questions in order to let the teachers and students tell their own stories, but some of my own biases did come through simply because I was looking for information in a particular area. Sometimes, rather than let the respondents just tell their own stories, I did try to stick to my own agenda to get information about general diploma classes, which placed the balance of power in my hands. The teachers usually stuck to the topic, while the students often became sidetracked in telling stories that I felt were not relevant to the study.

The very fact that interviewing is a conversational relation between two people involves risk taking for both parties (Weber, 1986, p.66). There is the risk of exposure where we may reveal more than we want to reveal. Not only do we learn about each other and the topic of conversation, we also learn more about ourselves. While research interviewing is a direct and reliable access to information, a personal relationship facilitates the gathering of data. Research interviewing may be very useful to the educational researcher, but there are guidelines and ethical procedures to be considered in using this method of research.

Interview Format

A researcher may choose to conduct interviews because observational techniques alone may not reveal people's hopes, plans or feelings (Parker, 1984), or the researcher may want to supplement a questionnaire with direct interviews to collect more personal information. Interviewing can enhance the reliability and the validity of both observation and questionnaires through the triangulation of data (Parker, 1984). There is a broad range of interview formats that the researcher may choose. However, the interviewer must consider to what extent the interview is an intervention in the life of the respondent and must follow ethical guidelines in conducting interviews. It is important to have clearly defined research goals and to chose the method of data collection and analysis to suit the research question.

I chose to conduct non-standardized interviews as opposed to a standardized or structured interview format so I could let the teachers and students relate as much of their own stories as possible. In the standardized interview the interviewer collects the same categories of information from a number of respondents (Gorden, 1980). There is a hierarchical nature to this type of interview as the interviewer initiates the topics of discussion, directs the flow of the interview, and decides if the response is adequate (Mishler, 1986, p.30). The interviewer specifies the questions in advance and uses the same questions in the same order with each participant.

In the non-standardized interview, the interviewer does not pose all the same questions to all the respondents. The purpose in this type of interview is to reflect on the responses as a group or to compare one individual's response with another (Gorden, 1980). Usually the information cannot be statistically summarized. The main objective in this case was for the researcher to carry on a guided conversation to gather rich and detailed material (Mishler, 1986). It was not necessary to hold to a rigid plan. A plan may be used as a checklist of points to be covered, but it is more open to the interpretation of the respondent.

For several months before I conducted the formal interviews, I talked informally with a number of teachers about my research project. From these informal conversations, I started to form questions in general areas that seemed to be of interest to most teachers. Several teachers volunteered to be interviewed before I even asked, because they were already interested in my study. I started the interviews with a general plan of open-ended questions; but, in most cases, I found that if I let the teachers just talk, they eventually covered the topics on my list which reflects our already existing frame of reference and interest. This type of interview generated a great deal of quotable material.

Planning the Interview

Once the researcher has focused on the problem of the study, he/she may begin formulating specific questions and deciding on the strategies, techniques or tactics that may be used in the interview process. A pilot study using a small sample may be useful in discovering a natural order of topics and to get a flow of questions for a later study (Brenner et al., 1985). The early interviews may be a practice or training session for later interviews by the same person.

An interview guide provides an outline or checklist of topics to be covered (Gorden, 1980). The interviewer may follow it closely or let the interview flow. The interview guide may go through several revisions during the course of the study. One way of constructing an agenda is to use a top-down approach where topics are raised in order of generality (Tomlinson, 1989). By starting with general questions and moving towards more specific questions, the interviewer can seek further elaboration where necessary. The interviewer may decide to completely disregard the interview agenda to elicit spontaneous responses from the participant.

The researcher must decide on the number of people that will be needed for the study and the method used to locate people who are willing to participate. One method of finding respondents willing to be interviewed is through random sampling. Researchers may pick names from a mailing list or, in the field of education, from a list of teachers in a particular school district. Another method is to conduct a pilot study to locate a specific type of informant (Gorden, 1980). After finding respondents who agree to be interviewed, the researcher must build a relationship with them in order to gain access to their life and view of the study. The quality of the data gathered will depend on the quality of the relationship that has been created (Measor, 1985). The best relationship occurs when both the researcher and the respondent have a shared interest in the research study. An advance letter outlining the purpose of the study and the importance of their contributions may be helpful in obtaining cooperation from the respondents (Wiersma, 1986). It is necessary to interview more than one person to obtain a more detailed account and to cross-check accuracy (Gorden, 1980).

Interviewers need to have flexible schedules in order to plan mutually convenient times to hold the interview (Young and Tardif, 1988). When interviewing teachers, it is important to work around teaching loads, extra-curricular involvement and busy times such as reporting periods. If the interviewer is going to tape record the interview, it is necessary to obtain consent from the participants prior to the interview.

For my own research study, I had been thinking about my questions and talking to other teachers informally for several months before I started the formal interviews. I decided to conduct interviews at the school where I had been teaching. Because I knew which teachers were involved with general diploma classes, I did not have to conduct a pilot study to locate a specific type of informant. Several months earlier I had received permission from both the principal of the school and the superintendent of the school district to collect data in the school.

I did not, in this case, prepare an introductory letter because I was able to personally discuss my study with the teachers involved. I started by interviewing six teachers of general diploma courses. I later interviewed four more who were suggested by other teachers as having valuable contributions to make to my study. I conducted the interviews over a four-day period at the end of the first semester. The first two days were part of the final exam week for the high school students so there were no high school classes. The final two days were during semester break, during which no students were at the school. I spoke to the teachers two weeks before the interviews to set times that would be most convenient for them. Taking into consideration their time constraints, as suggested by Young and Tardif (1988), I planned for a thirty-minute interview with each teacher. In all but two cases, the interviews went smoothly with no outside interruptions and we were finished in about thirty minutes. The other two interviews took longer due to interruptions by other staff members.

Before the interviews, I prepared a set of open-ended guide questions to use in getting the interview started, but I hoped that the teachers would also relate stories about their experiences with general diploma students. When answering open-ended questions, the respondent is free to respond in a relatively unrestricted manner and allowed to construct his/her own answer. It is an appropriate style for determining the frame of reference, opinions of the respondent, and level of information to be gathered. The advantages of open-ended questions are: there are no restrictions imposed by questionnaire design, the respondents can answer using their own reasoning and thinking patterns, the data will be filled with quotable material, useful sources of information may be provided for further questions, and there will not be responses where none exist (Smith, 1975).

Question Guide for Teachers

1. Which general diploma courses are you teaching or have you taught?
2. What are general diploma students like?
3. What discipline methods do you use?
4. What are your homework expectations?
5. What strategies do you use when teaching general diploma students?
6. Do you prefer to teach general diploma classes, advanced diploma classes or a mixture of both?
7. Are there optimum class sizes for general diploma classes?
8. How do you think students perceive these classes?
9. How do you think other teachers perceive these classes?
10. Do you have any stories you would like to tell about your experiences with general diploma students?

Conducting the Interviews

Even though I had read several "how to" books on interviewing, I was a little nervous to start with. I was worried about remembering all of the strategies that I should use such as those suggested by Measor (1985) and Parker (1984) to keep me from biasing the data:

a) be non judgmental
b) suggest alternate response possibilities to
counterbalance a slanting effect.
c) use probing and follow-up questions to enhance clarity

d) stay critically aware

e) look for meaning behind what was said

Technical considerations in methods texts also caution that the appearance of the interviewer is an important factor to consider. According to Measor (1985), the interviewer should monitor his/her "personal characteristics, comments, gestures, and actions" (p.60) as these can all affect the interview. Clark (1976) suggests that the interviewer should dress simply, neatly and inconspicuously so as not to intimidate the respondent. Because the interviews with the teachers were conducted during semester break, most of the teachers in the school were dressed very casually in jeans. I decided that this was not an occasion where I wanted to look like a "professional expert" from the university, but rather a trusted colleague attempting to gain insights through conversations. When I later interviewed the students, I again dressed more casually to increase their acceptance of me in a non-teacher role.

In the planning process, I had informed the teachers that I would like to record the conversation if that was acceptable to them. All agreed to be taped, but two wanted to know who would have access to the information, and one was concerned that the school administration may have access to the tapes. I assured all of them that their confidentiality would be maintained as the tapes would only be heard by me and would be destroyed once my study was completed. I did not include their names on the tape recordings but, instead, used code numbers to identify each person for my own use.

Although I was recording the interviews, I also decided to take point form notes of important points. Brenner et al.(1985) point out that one of the dangers of taping is the interviewer may cease to listen carefully to the conversation. Thus, some note taking along with recording may be more reliable. After some initial problems in getting the tape recorder to work properly and deciding where to position the machine so it would not be the center of focus but still be close enough to record the conversation, the first interview was underway. I started the interview with an informal chat as a non-threatening "warm-up" period (Clark, 1976, p.37). I talked about the courses that I was taking, how it felt to be out of the classroom after eighteen years, and what I hoped to accomplish by my research study before asking the teachers about their experiences.

The Interviews

The first interview was fairly successful because the teacher was familiar with my study and very experienced in teaching general diploma students. She had several stories that she related about situations in her classes that supplemented the guide questions. I was able to practice the silent probes of head nodding and the direct encouragement probes of "yes" or "I see" (Clark, 1976). Although I received very rich and valuable data, the interview was more clinical and less of a conversation with among colleagues than I would have liked. I ended the interview with an informal chat before leaving.

The second interview was even less conversational. I interviewed a teacher who was very experienced in teaching academic students, but who had little experience with general diploma students. She seemed to be very nervous, giving short and not very detailed answers despite my attempts at all the non-verbal signals of eye contact, smiling, and projection of concern (Measor, 1985). Leading questions and elaboration statements such as: "Anything else?", "Why do you think that is so?", (Clark, 1976, p.45) did not work well either. I found that I was doing much more talking than I wanted to just to try to get some kind of response. For this interview, the very fact that I felt uncomfortable and thought I had to talk to fill the silences, I feel decreased the validity and reliability of the data gathered.

Following the second interview, I spent some more time planning and revising my methods. Stainback and Stainback (1989, p.274) state that group interviews are useful, particularly in the initial interviews because they are less intimidating for the informant, and a group may be able to stimulate each other to share information and detail. The advantages of a group interview are to raise more issues or to get a collective view of the problem. However, the interviewer is placed in a different role than in a one-to-one situation (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987). Rather than interviewing, the researcher is establishing or facilitating a discussion and, as such, becomes a moderator, facilitator, or group leader (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987). I decided to give group interviewing a try after one of the teachers suggested I interview two of them together. Because there were only two respondents involved, it was slightly different than interviewing a larger group, but it did give me some new insights.

The two teachers were very much alike in their teaching philosophies so they were able to stimulate each other. Neither one dominated the conversation, allowing the other the opportunity to give specific examples of situations that had taken place in their classes. I had little to do in my role as facilitator other than to nod or ask the occasional question for clarification. From this joint reflection, I was able to develop and revise my guide list of questions to use for further interviews.

Taping a group interview is essential as the conversation may be too fast for note taking. However, problems do arise when interviewing more than one person. This group was small enough so we were able to position the tape recorder in order that the quality of the recording was maintained. If a larger group was being recorded, there would certainly be problems with the quality (Watts & Ebbutt, 1987). Transcribing or analyzing the data collected may also be difficult if there are problems of people talking over each other, or if the various speakers are difficult to identify. Because I was familiar with both teachers, I did not experience this problem.

In a larger group, there may be problems with group dynamics. While the situation affords the researcher the opportunity to observe group dynamics, respondents may interrupt each other, change the subject in midstream, not respond in an orderly way or react to each other and not just the question being investigated (Mostyn, 1985, p.119). One dominant person may help keep the group going, but may also be too dominant and inhibit the views of other people. Luckily, the problems that Watts and Ebbutt warn about did not arise and, for me, the group interview was very rewarding because I was able to collect rich and detailed description and also generate ideas and questions for further interviews.

From this point on, the interviews seemed to get easier, either because I was becoming more skilled at the process or because I was becoming more comfortable and relaxed about my own role. Some of the best moments occurred when the participant and I became caught up in the topic of the conversation itself, forgetting that the tape recorder was on, allowing us to share our own experiences. During these times of mutual reflection, it became less of an interview and more of an intimate conversation between friends and colleagues. By offering my own opinions, ideas and reflections, I was deviating from the standard interview practices where the interviewer is to remain neutral. However, I also felt that by sharing my own experiences, in an atmosphere of congeniality and rapport, I was able to collect more rich and detailed data than I may have from a more clinical interview process.

There are both advantages and disadvantages of interviewing colleagues. Because there was already a social and professional relationship established between the participants and myself, I was able to gain insights into their experiences with general diploma students that an outside researcher may not have been able to obtain. It is also possible that because they knew me so well and were aware of my research study, they may have felt they were helping me by telling me what I wanted to know. It was for this reason that I decided to interview a larger number of teachers than I had originally planned so I could get a cross-comparison between their responses.

As Weber (1986) suggests, I, too, have found that some of the interviews never end. Whenever I visit the school or have lunch with some of the teachers, I find that my research study becomes one of the topics of conversation. Because these teachers have many valuable contributions to make to my data collection, I have started taking a notebook with me to record their ideas. At first, I'm sure that everyone wondered why I was always writing notes during our conversations, but now they are quite comfortable with me recording little bits of information during our informal chats. I often ask questions based on what someone else has said, adding new dimensions to my data collection.

One aspect that has been very enlightening for me in talking with other teachers is the realization that we share many of the same experiences when working with general diploma students. Teaching is normally a very isolated activity. Once classes have started and the doors are closed, most teachers have little idea about what the others are doing. Even though we talk about our work and the students from time to time, this was my first opportunity to find out that other teachers had similar problems, concerns, feelings or insights that I have. The pleasure I received from listening and sharing with other teachers in the same situations was very beneficial and rewarding for me.

c) Questioning students

The questionnaire was used to gather information from general diploma students about their reasons for being in a general diploma route, their satisfaction with the program, and if they felt they were treated any differently by either teachers or students because they were in this route.

Because the views of the students were important to the study, open-ended questions were used to elicit detailed responses that were in the students' own words and phrases. A pilot questionnaire was conducted to determine the readability and comprehension by the students. The questions included in the pilot questionnaire were evaluated to ensure that they were congruent with the purpose of the study

(Evans, 1984). Also considered in the design were the length of the questions and the length of the questionnaire itself. The pilot study revealed that the language and terminology used in the questionnaire was too difficult for the students to understand clearly. After revisions, the questionnaire was administered to all the students enrolled in general diploma English courses in grades ten, eleven, and twelve during the first semester. Later the same questionnaire was administered to students registered in general diploma courses in the second semester.

English classes were selected because English is a required course at all grade levels providing me with access to the majority of general diploma students. Before the questionnaire was distributed to the students, instructions were given regarding the purpose of the study and the procedure for completing it. Students were also informed that confidentially would be maintained, and that they were not required to complete the questionnaire if they did not wish to do so.

Once the questionnaires were completed, I divided them into three groups by subject level. I was interested in finding out if there were any differences in understandings between those students just starting the general diploma route in grade ten and those in grade twelve who had been in this route for two or more years.

d) Interviewing the students

During the observations of the general diploma classes, I was able to identify a number of students who volunteered to be interviewed. Because more students volunteered than I had time to interview, I selected some from each class. I interviewed the students in February and March after making arrangements with their specific teachers to allow these students to be released from their classes. Students and parents were informed of the study and their option to withdraw at any time during the study. As with the teachers, I prepared a set of open-ended guide questions to use in getting the interview started.

Because I was becoming more comfortable with the interview process and my role as an interviewer, I found that interviewing the students was easier. One of the problems I faced was finding an available, quiet room in which to hold the interviews. I finally decided to use one of the book storage rooms which was roomy, quiet, and had a place to plug in my tape recorder. I called the students from the classes one at a time to conduct the interviews.

As with the teachers, I started with an informal chat to let them know what I was doing and to briefly find out about them. The students were all very interested in the study and pleased that someone would be doing a study about general diploma students. Most of the students willingly answered the open-ended questions and gave added details with a little prompting. Two students answered with only brief responses even though I tried to encourage more detailed responses. These two students have always been very vocal in class about expressing their opinions, but I felt that they were intimidated by the tape recorder. After I turned the recorder off, they did respond more willingly as I took notes. The interviews with the students were very enlightening and informative.

Question Guide for Students

1. What made you choose to go into the general diploma program?
2. What do you like about the general diploma courses?
3. What do you dislike about the general diploma courses?
4. What benefits are there in being in this program?
5. Are there any disadvantages for you by being in this program?
6. Does being in the general diploma program affect your treatment by other students in any way?
7. Does being in the general diploma program affect your treatment by teachers in any way?

8. Will the general diploma program help you reach your goals after you are out of school?

9. Are there factors outside of school that make it difficult for you to either complete your work or give full concentration to school work?

10. Are your friends in the advanced or general diploma route? What are their reasons for being in these programs?

INTERPRETING THE DATA

> "Unfortunately, in our haste to publish, to analyze, and to write, we may forget our commitment and responsibility as human beings, turning the interview into 'data', overlooking or destroying the experience of its very creation as we jump immediately to typed transcripts, substituting without hesitation the printed word for the lived experience." (Weber, 1986, p.70)

There is a pressure upon researchers to justify their research in terms of scientific data which assumes there is one true or right way to interpret the data (Mishler, 1986). There is a wide difference in views of data analysis from Mostyn (1985), who sees the purpose of content analysis as the transference of raw material into scientific data, to Mishler (1986), who maintains that we cannot rely on standard methods to analyze narratives; to Miles and Huberman (1984), who view themselves in the middle between positivist and idealist perspectives. Qualitative data is rich in detail giving explanations of process within a local context. This rich detail makes analysis difficult. There are few reliable and valid analysis procedures such as those commonly used in standard scientific experiments.

Content analysis, then, is a diagnostic tool which qualitative researchers use to try to make sense out of raw material that has been collected in the form of field notes, transcripts or tape recordings (Mostyn, 1985, p.117). The main purpose is to identify specific characteristics of communication systematically and objectively to see if regularities occur in terms of single words, themes, or concepts (Mostyn, 1985). Another purpose is to understand the meaning of the communication within the context of the respondent's frame of reference. According to Mostyn, the basic requirements of content analysis are that it be objective, free from analyst bias, systematic, designed to obtain data that is relevant to the research question; and its generality, it can be applied to other situations. Mostyn cites examples that show there have been attempts to improve the reliability of qualitative content analysis through the development of coded responses according to quantitative principles to score open-ended responses. Since most qualitative projects are one study events that cannot be replicated exactly, it is difficult to correlate feelings and attitudes with other variables to estimate validity. One way to check validity is by comparing accounts of description, explanations or experiences (Brenner et al., 1985). The results are more valid if the experiences are the same across the accounts.

Mostyn (1985) maintains that to be able to interpret the data, the researcher must distance him/herself from the problem to gain new perspectives, work with contradictions, and explore new relationships. The researcher should also ask and try to answer: "What is the meaning of this?" (p.140). The report must be clear to readers who have not had the opportunity to listen to the interviews or read the raw material. In Mostyn's opinion, good content analysis answers some questions, but also raises other. Thus, more research will be required.

In his chapter on narrative analysis, Mishler (1986, p.76) states that meaning is expressed in and through discourse, but treating responses as stories or narratives creates analytic problems. In standard interviews, the respondents' stories are often suppressed when responses are limited to specific questions. Stories are more often heard in unstructured interviews when the respondents have more control over the flow of topics and can speak in their own voices. However, problems arise in the interpretation, depending on how the researcher views the information and what boundaries have been established for the stories. Mishler contends that there needs to be the development of alternative methods from those of "generalizability, reliability, and replicability" (p. 109) for interpreting issues because these are more traditional and scientific forms for assessing research which assumes there is one right way to interpret data. He suggests the viability of "alternative interpretations that are sifted, compared and evaluated for plausibility through the extended and diverse histories of research on particular topics." (p.115)

To analyze my own data, I decided to listen to the tapes and review my notes several times to look for common themes. A theme was an issue or a topic that recurred in the interviews. I then attempted to describe these regularities in the context of the teachers' and students' frames of reference and from my own experience in teaching general diploma students. I held brief meetings with each of the teachers to go over the my interpretations of what they had said to see if they wished to make some changes. The questionnaires were analyzed in the same way by looking for common themes.

VALIDITY

Although validity is an important factor in all research, maintaining validity in qualitative research requires different procedures than in quantitative research. For example, third-party confirmability is not an objective in qualitative research. Rather, interpretive research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the participants instead to trying to make generalizations about large populations. Validity in qualitative research is measured through the agreement of responses by the participants (Thompson, 1978). The checking and re-checking of the interpretation of the responses over time increases the validity of the study.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) argue that internal validity can be maintained by providing plausible alternative explanations and by leaving a clear audit trail to support the interpretations. The reader should be satisfied that the researcher did what he/she set out to do and that it is an honest portrayal of the situation. To ensure external validity, Guba and Lincoln maintain that the concepts of transferability and generalizability must also be satisfied. Can the findings be applied to other situations and would other researchers come up with the same conclusions?

Rather than reliability and validity, Brenner suggests alternate concepts of authenticity and attestability. Authenticity is described as corroborative support by artifacts or cross-reference to other sources of information. Attestability is the degree the researcher has made the methods explicit so others can scrutinize and evaluate them (Brenner et al., 1985, p.155). Although much of the data collected in qualitative research is in the form of thoughts, feelings, and attitudes and is difficult to verify, one way is through observation. I observed classes to see if the interactions within the classrooms were the same as the interpretations of the students and the teachers about those interactions. I found that while the teachers were generally accurate in their interpretations of what went on in the classroom, the students behavior was different from what they reported to me in the interviews and the questionnaires. Basically, the students were more disruptive than they said they were, but the other interactions in the classroom were much the same as reported by both the teachers and the students.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this study was to investigate what the experience of being in a general diploma class is like from the point of view of teachers and students. I wanted to find out if the students were satisfied with the general diploma route and if they felt that their general classes were helpful in attaining their future goals. I was also interested in finding out the teachers' understandings of general students, and if they liked teaching these classes. To complete this study, I incorporated the use of a variety of research techniques including: student questionnaires, participant observation, and informal and formal interviews with students and teachers. The questionnaires provided information about how the students felt about general diploma classes. The interviews provided me with the opportunity to gain a more in-depth understanding of both the teachers' and the students' views on general diploma classes.

While I did experience some of the problems associated with conducting ethnographic research as outlined by Stainback and Stainback (1989), I feel that this method of research allowed me to collect rich and detailed data that I may not have otherwise been able to gather. During the first part of my research, time became a major issue for me. Trying to fit data gathering in with all the responsibilities associated with teaching was not always an easy task. I soon found that I needed to be extremely organized in order to accomplish all that I had set out to do. During the second stage of the research, when I no longer was limited by teaching responsibilities, time was not a factor and I enjoyed the research process much more.

Once the data had been gathered, the next major issue was how to analyze it. Qualitative data is difficult to analyze because there are not methods available such as those in scientific research which measure generalizability, reliability, and replicability. Dobbert (1984) notes that an increased comfort level between the researcher and the participant will produce greater reliability and validity of the data collected to produce a more rounded picture of the situation. I feel that because the respondents were so familiar to me that the data I collected from the interviews was more reliable and valid than an outside researcher may have been able to collect. However, I constantly compared the accounts of the respondents looking for similarities and plausible explanations. I also spent a great deal of time discussing my conclusions with my colleagues to make sure that researcher bias was not going to be a problem. There were times when a colleague would point out another possible explanation or observation that I had not considered. I feel that having the opportunity to continually discuss my own observations and ideas with others who were interested in this study was a very valuable aspect of the data analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore, by listening to the voices of the students and teachers, what the experience of being in a general diploma course is like. As indicated in Chapter One, I had some preconceived ideas about what I would find, based on my own years of experience teaching these students. While some of my own pre-understandings were reinforced, I also gained a much deeper and different understanding of general diploma students and their teachers.

After only a few interviews with the teachers, I saw a definite split between those who enjoyed teaching general students and those who did not. At first, I thought it was a gender issue because the females I had interviewed to that point had very positive comments about general students, whereas the males preferred to teach academic students. I started forming conclusions as to why this may be, such as: women are more motherly, nurturing etc., and can cope with these students on a more personal level. Before drawing any more conclusions about why some teachers liked and some disliked teaching general diploma students, I decided to interview more male teachers. I soon discovered that it may not be a gender issue at all, but more a difference in teacher personality and philosophy. I decided to put the issue of gender to the side, for the time being at least.

I was also surprised with some of the responses that I received from the students. I knew that the students at this school were generally satisfied, but I did not expect to get such positive responses from the general diploma students about the program, the teachers, and the school. Although there were a few negative comments about some of the classes, students or teachers, the comments were not necessarily about the general diploma program itself, but more about schooling in general. It may be that because this is a relatively small community and the students know each other well, there is not the social stigma attached to being in a general diploma program that often exists in larger urban high schools. The school, itself, is small enough so students may have the same teacher several times during the junior and senior high years. This familiarity maybe a factor in the positive feelings and responses from the students.

In this chapter I will present the views and experiences of both the teachers and the students and my interpretations of the data that was gathered. In analyzing the data, I found that several themes emerged in the responses from the teachers and students. While they did have some similar experiences and views, I felt that the themes that arose were so distinct that it was necessary to present the responses from each group separately. The teachers' themes center around personal teaching style and philosophy, whereas identity and self-esteem are the main student themes. Although I had attempted to interview students from each of the student types that I had earlier identified, there did not seem to be specific differences in their responses. I discussed the responses from both the teachers and the students with two of my colleagues, and, together, we came up with ideas for theme titles for this chapter.

TEACHER INTERPRETATION OF GENERAL STUDENTS

Theme 1 - Discipline : The Contradiction of Control

I received basically the same information from all the teachers as to the motivation and classroom behavior of general diploma students. Comments were: "difficult to motivate", "short attention spans", "lazy", "lack of self-control", "attitude problems", "talk too much", "yappy", "poor study habits", and "attendance problems." Some teachers viewed these characteristics as control problems that had to be dealt with using discipline measures, while others saw lack of motivation and poor behavior as a challenge in developing new teaching strategies that would minimize these characteristics.

Most teachers felt that general diploma students were very vocal in class, speaking instantaneously rather than thinking about something, thus revealing a lack of self-control. General students easily got off topic and say exactly what that think which makes classroom control a problem. The general interpretation was that these students like to "talk lots" and not necessarily about the task that they are working on. The exception to this was in a Career and Life Management class, where there is a mixture of academic and general students. In those classes, the general students rarely spoke, which was a direct reversal of what appeared to be the case in regular general diploma classes. One of the teachers felt that the general students were intimidated by the academic students and did not want to appear dumb, so they would not say anything. General students appear to feel more comfortable with each other, which could explain why teachers would find them more of a problem in the general classes than in the mixed classes.

In the discussions on discipline, two divergent views emerged; but, both were related to the concept of control. One group of teachers felt that they had to use more discipline measures with these students and keep on top of them all of the time because they will always try to "fool around". Some felt that they were less easy to "rein in", and therefore, the teacher had to be more structured and not let them get away with anything. For the academic students, the subject matter is the discipline, but in general courses, the teacher has to do the disciplining. The folowing responses by five teachers illustrates these views.

> O - I can't take them on as many activities such as field trips because they just won't behave themselves. They don't appreciate extra activities.
>
> H - I expect the same behavior from them as I do from an academic class, but I have to be much more on top of things.
>
> F - I know that I have to be strict with them and not let them get away on me.

> M - They don't appreciate any privileges and tend to abuse them so I have to keep a tight control on them.

> G - They never bring pens, paper, books to class which bothers me. An academic student always has all the necessary materials.

The other group of teachers felt that they had to let some of the minor things go instead of being after them all of the time. Their idea was to have a sense of humor and let things roll off from time to time.

> E - Let them break little rules. They appreciate that and will work harder.

> A - I don't expect them to have their noses to the grindstone for 80 minutes. You have to be creative if you want them to get their work done. Sometimes I'll let one work in the hall or a storage room. If one is very distracting to the rest of the class, a time out can be a life saver for the teacher.

> W - You can't let them get under your skin or they will drive you crazy. You need to have a sense of humor.

> M - Deal with them privately. Never try to humiliate one of them in front of the others, or they will close ranks against the teacher. You just can't make them feel bad in front of others or you will lose them.

> T - Much of their behavior is to gain attention. For example, if they leave class when they are not supposed to, the intent isn't to leave or sneak out but to receive attention from the teacher and the students. One day when the bell went, some of the students wanted to get out of the room quickly so they jumped out of the window. I made them exit by the window for the next week after all the other students had gone. No one tried to leave by the window again.

> C - It is lethal to say no or criticize an answer that they give as they may never respond to a question again.

> A - I try not to lose my cool when I get angry with them, but if I do, they understand.

These two contradictory approaches to discipline are actually two sides of the same coin both having to do with the phenomena of control. Possibly students need to sense a real, functioning, motivated person behind the discipline techniques. General diploma students apparently will not react well to an "act " or a "phony", but to a real person, whatever their approach to discipline. From the positive responses from students about the general courses, it seems apparent that they will respond to either type of discipline method. Thus, the discipline techniques used by individual teachers are related to that teacher's personal teaching style and philosophy rather than to specific characteristics of general diploma students.

Loss of control is to some teachers the worst nightmare, but to others some of the best teaching is done in uncontrolled circumstances. Some teachers like the thrill and challenge of "almost" losing control. Teachers who don't mind giving up some of their control were the ones who said they liked teaching general diploma students. Again, there was a definite split among teachers as to whether they preferred to teach general or advanced classes. No one preferred to teach only general students, as they felt that would be too exhausting. Half of those interviewed said they preferred a combination of academic and general classes.

The academic students challenge the teacher mentally, but they are more reserved. General students can be more fun in group discussions, especially on "hot topics" because they have such strong opinions and are not afraid to express them. Again, the matter of being in control of the situation was evident. Class discussions can easily get out of control with general diploma students, and what may seem like fun for one teacher would be a major problem for another.

> E - Others see them as rowdy, noisy, but I think they are playful. If you help them, they really appreciate it, but you have to be able to perform everyday to keep their interest.
>
> O - Most teachers don't want them. You have to worry about getting fired if you don't do a good job.
>
> A - Even though they are more tiring to teach, you can have a lot of fun with them. I would never give up teaching those kids because it is a good break for me from the academic classes where the pressure to do well is so great.
>
> W - General students give me more of a sense of achievement even though they are more tiring to teach.
>
> G - Some see them as the "class from hell" and don't want to teach them. Teachers who do a really good job with these kids see it as an opportunity to help them and give them a chance for success.

Teachers who like to be in control of the class at all times preferred to teach the academic classes where students are seen as being more teachable, more self-disciplined, requiring less teacher direction, having better attendance, completing homework and living up to the expectations of the teacher. Some teachers were very frustrated with general students.

> H - It's important to match the teacher's personality to the course. I like to see progress at a faster rate than I can with general students.
>
> F - They aren't willing to try new things and are not much of a challenge to teach.
>
> W - There is less academic pressure in general diploma classes, but it is exhausting trying to entertain them and keep them under control.

The concept of control varies from teacher to teacher depending on personal teaching style and philosophy. What seems to be out of control to one teacher is classified as "fun" by another. Those teachers who always like to be in control tend to operate their academic and general classes in the same way. They would prefer to teach the academics because there is less potential for loss of control. These teachers are also concerned with how others, especially the administration, see them. It is important to them that they are seen to be in control of the class at all times. They were concerned that they might be judged along with the students they were teaching.

To some teachers, teaching general students is viewed as a low prestige assignment. Teachers who were less concerned about class control were also less worried about how others saw them. They weren't worried about losing control as they felt that they could easily regain it when necessary. In the classes that I observed, the students seemed to be able to adapt to either type of discipline method.

Theme 2 - The Personal Touch

Several teachers said there are more personal contacts and long term relationships developed with general students than academics students. The general diploma students seem to have more sensitivity to the teacher as a real person. Although diploma students like to succeed, the mark isn't everything. They work to feel good about themselves, not necessarily to get high marks. Because marks are not the motivating factor, these students are seen as more honest and trustworthy and less likely to cheat than academic students. Building relationships with the teacher becomes very important to these students. This may be because they have not always been successful in the past, and forming a relationship with the teacher increases their self-esteem. Even though they may not do well in the class, they can feel good about themselves if they think that the teacher likes them.

Some teachers encourage this closer relationship because they feel it helps them to be more effective with general students. These students can also be very good for the teacher's self-esteem; if they like a teacher, they are not afraid to say so. Conversely, if they don't like the teacher, that is made quite plain as well. The teachers who reported liking these classes were the ones who encouraged a more personal relationship with the students.

> A - Teachers can feel secure knowing that if students like them, it is honest. If a general student brings me cookies, I know it is because he/she likes me. If an academic student brings me cookies, I don't know if he/she likes me or just wants a good mark.
>
> C - General students will cross the street to talk to me and shake my hand after I have taught them. They will bring their friends, spouses and babies to visit, but often academic students will not even say hello to me when they are on the same side of the street. Academics are more concerned with marks than relationships.
>
> E - Academic students will be really nice to me when I'm teaching them, but won't even acknowledge me when they are no longer in my class. General students are nice to me whether I'm still teaching them or not.

Several teachers had stories to tell that illustrates that despite their often tough exterior, general diploma students can be very loyal and compassionate. When a general student likes a teacher, they can be fiercely loyal, and when they are angry at or frustrated by a teacher, they can be vindictive.

> A - If the students like you, they will be very loyal. Once I was being evaluated by the superintendent, and the kids were being super. We were reading aloud, and one boy who could hardly read put up his hand to

> volunteer. He stumbled over all the words, but the evaluator was so impressed that this boy would do that for me.
>
> T - One of the girls in the class was killed in an accident, and while we were discussing the incident, I broke down. I left the room and went to the staffroom to compose myself. I was afraid to leave the class for too long fearing that they might be tearing the place apart or jumping out of the windows. When I got back, everyone was quietly working. One of the boys had looked in my plan book to see what we were doing that day and had given the assignment to the class.
>
> W - When one of the girls in the class was killed, I asked all of the students to write notes to her parents as part of the letter writing assignment. I let them write what they felt such as: "I didn't always get along with Jane, but I'm sorry she's dead." The parents later told me how much they appreciated those notes because they were written from the heart.

Another teacher had a much different view outlining how cruel they can be.

> O - They will make up stories about you to shoot you down. Sometimes they will make up stories and go to the administration so you get in trouble. You have to be on your guard at all times.

With general students, emotions, positive or negative, play a big part in their learning experience. These students seem to need emotional validation in one way or another in order to learn. Hate and/or love of a teacher can be powerful motivators.

To maintain a personal touch with general students, teachers need to be aware that many of these students have a fragile self-esteem. Many think of themselves as the "dummies." Most of them measure their self-esteem by means other than school work; therefore, it is important for teachers to build their self-esteem in other ways.

> A - I tell them why they are not dumb. If there is something wrong with the VCR, I'll get one of the general students to fix it, not one of the academics. They are often more worldly and know more about how things operate in the real world.

In order to have the time to build these personal relationships, teachers agreed that it was necessary to have small classes. Not only did too many students cause control problems, there were problems working with a much wider variety of academic abilities. These students need more one-on-one help so the teacher needs the time to get around to each student. However, several expressed the opinion that classes that were too small were also a problem because the students tried to get too personal which made it difficult for the teacher to stay on task. It seems that about 20 students in a general diploma class was the ideal number for the teacher to be able to maintain the personal touch and to be able to keep things under control.

> T - Under 25 is best because they have so little self-control. They will yell across the room to their friends or get out of their desks to wander around the room.

> A - Small is best because they need so much attention. The girls are usually really quiet, and the boys dominate discussions. You need time to draw the girls out of their shells.

Theme 3 - Strategies for Success - "What Works"

It appears that, along with the personality of and discipline approach used by the teacher, strategies are very important in general diploma classes to both keep the class under control and to cover the required material. In the classes that I observed, the teachers placed more emphasis on practical and visual aspects by showing videos, having role playing activities, and debates. General diploma students are very talented artistically and enjoy doing charts and posters. This allows them the opportunity to be successful at something which helps to contribute to their self-esteem. It is necessary in general diploma classes to be able to bring the material to the level that the students can understand and at which they can be successful. Teachers who had fewer problems doing this seemed to be the ones that enjoyed teaching these classes. The social studies and English teachers read much of the material aloud to the students because they often have reading and comprehension problems.

General students like to bring in life experiences, both theirs and the teachers' to help illustrate points. If a teacher lets them contribute, they will add to the lessons by sharing their personal anecdotes. This allows them the opportunity to relate the lessons to their everyday life which may make it easier for them to understand and to remember. Although allowing the students to tell their own stories is a strategy that some teachers feel works well for them, it is also related to the personal touch theme in providing the opportunity for teachers and students to form closer relationships.

> A - You have to go for the humorous side of everything. Sex and booze get their attention. Use a sex or a drinking story to get their attention, and then sneak in the real stuff. Often that is how they can remember the material by remembering the story.
>
> E - You have to keep your sense of humor. You can't worry about what an evaluator would think.
>
> C - Sometimes you have to let them have some fun, and then they will work for you.
>
> G - I go over the material three times to make sure they get it. We read aloud, use the information in another situation, and bring in other materials to reinforce it. They will often bring their own things that they want to discuss.
>
> T - I have to be an actor. When I was teaching the French Revolution, I was telling them about people throwing garbage out into the street. I pretended to be dodging garbage as I walked around the classroom. They loved it!
>
> H - I modify some of the work to make it more practical. I also reward minor tasks such as giving short quizzes rather than only one test on a whole unit. They have a better chance to be successful.
>
> M - I try to treat them as adults. They respond well to a family atmosphere in class. If I let them say what they want, they are willing to discuss more.
>
> F - I try to teach practical things that they can use when they get out of school. Apply things to their life or relate them to what is happening in the world today.

It is evident that teachers have developed teaching strategies that work well for them in dealing with general classes. The number of different activities and techniques that they use indicates that the teachers have taken the time to look at what problems the students may have and have taken steps that will help these students to be successful. The teachers understand that these students learn in different ways so they utilize a number of methods to cover the various learning styles that these students may have.

All of the teachers agreed that homework completion was a major problem with general students. Although a few demanded that they do homework and gave detentions if it wasn't completed, most worked on a policy of minimal homework.

Those who did assign homework, checked to make sure that it was done. Teachers also said that they did more marking for general diploma students because if they didn't take things for marks, it wouldn't get done. Again, teachers have developed their own strategies for assigning homework.

> C - I check homework because I think it is important to teach them study skills. If it is incomplete, I record that on the back of their attendance card. They soon get the message that they have to complete the assignments.
>
> D - I collect everything at the end of the class. That way I have partial marks at least. Otherwise they will just take a zero.
>
> A - I accept late assignments in general classes, but I won't in academic classes.
>
> M - If I give homework, I spend too much time collecting it or checking to see if it is done. If I give a DT, it is a punishment for me too. I work at getting them to complete their work in class.
>
> H - I work on a reward policy. If they get all their work done in class, I let them play games or do puzzles.

Teachers know that general students are often not too interested in being in school or in completing their work. Thus, it is necessary for them to develop strategies that will both motivate the students and help them be successful. Teachers at this school have developed a number of strategies that work. However, the same strategies do not work for all the teachers. It is necessary for each teacher to develop techniques that will work for them based on their own teaching style and philosophy. In developing teaching strategies, the teacher should keep in mind that general diploma students are different than academic students, having different wants, needs and experiences. It is important to develop strategies that address these differences.

STUDENT INTEPRETATIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES

Theme 1 - Which path do I take?

Although many of the students said they were influenced by their teachers, parents or other relatives to take the general route, they attributed being in this route to a difficulty that they had or their poor work habits in junior high. They realized that they had some problems such as poor reading or comprehension skills, troubles with math, or poor work habits. Most students admitted their own failings and did not blame anyone else for being in this route. These students appeared satisfied with their decision. For many, it was a matter of self-esteem. They had not been very successful in the past, so they decided to take the easier stream so they could do well, rather than struggle in the more academic classes. They would feel better about themselves if they could be successful in the non-academic classes than if they did poorly in the academic classes.

> I did not want to struggle to get by. A friend of mine is in English 10, and she only gets 50 in that class. I felt that it was better to receive high marks in general diploma courses rather than a failure or low marks in academic classes.
>
> My math marks weren't good enough because I have trouble in math. I really don't need my advanced diploma for the trade I want to go into.
>
> When I was in Grade Nine, I chose to go in the general route because I talked to my aunt who was here and she said that advanced was really hard. I knew myself that I didn't have the skills to tackle it.
>
> My goals aren't that high. I want to do something I'll enjoy and that I'll be good at so I don't aim too high. I go for what I can do.
>
> I figure that I'd go into farming so I didn't need an advanced diploma.
>
> I would never make the advanced diploma because I'm not smart enough.
>
> Being an adult student, I'm taking only the required courses I need to get into NAIT.
>
> It is easier and I did not want to risk graduating with my friends.
>
> I didn't want to devote myself to hard classes such as English 30. School is enough stress without having to worry about achieving the credits that I need.
>
> In grade 9 I was in the modified program because I was having trouble with math and with English as well. English I think because I was just too lazy to do the work. I took the general classes because I didn't think that I could do the work required in the advanced diploma route.
>
> I'm going for an advanced diploma, but I wanted to take English 13 to upgrade my English before doing English 10.

> I feel that I can do the advanced courses, but for right now I will stay in the general program because it is easier and there is less homework.
>
> When I came to this school in grade 9, I had not yet learned the importance of my education so I decided to slack off in grade 9.
>
> I went to the general diploma route because I was just passing the courses, and I needed to learn the material rather than goof off with all my friends.

Some students felt that they did not have a choice in choosing which program that they wanted to take even though the school policy allows students do go into an academic program in grade 10 regardless of their grade 9 results if they feel that they can handle the program. These students do not attribute their failings to themselves but blame someone else for being in the general route. Rather than trying to change the situation, they seem willing to continue blaming others. Students who blame others may be protecting their self-image. They do not want to admit to themselves that they may not be able to handle the more difficult classes.

> I did not want to go into the general diploma route, but I had no choice because the school lost my course registration form leaving me with the left-over courses.
>
> At the time, I felt that I couldn't do any better, but my friends and teachers tell me different now. I didn't think I was smart enough because all natives seemed to be considered dumb. They were almost all put into a modified program, not regular classes.
>
> It wasn't my choice to take the general diploma route. I actually didn't take my grade 9. They just put me in general classes because I was too old for grade 9. Plus, when I started school two years late, they wanted my to be with my proper age group.
>
> The teachers all told me I wouldn't make it in an advanced program.

Several students had switched from the advanced diploma route to the general route after taking grade 10. Some had gone into the advanced route because that is where all their friends were, but they were having difficulty with the courses so they decided to switch. Others had been pressured by their parents to take the advanced route even though they had poor marks in junior high. Again, self-esteem was the major issue. Students want to maintain their self-esteem by either keeping up with their friends or adhering to their parent's wishes. When they experience difficulty with the academic course work, their self-esteem is affected. They can either continue to struggle in the academic classes or switch to the general classes. Either of those two options may result in lower self-esteem for a period of time; however, often students who have switched routes do very well in the general courses which helps to improve their self-esteem.

> I have failed twice. I have trouble in school, and I don't want to fail again so I switched to the easier route.
>
> I switched to the general program because I thought it would help me do better in the advanced route. I want to finish my general diploma and then take the 20 and 30 classes. It doesn't matter if it takes me another year to do this.
>
> I switched routes because I took Math 13, and I thought I could go into the general classes and get higher marks.
>
> I found the advanced courses harder to understand, and they went really fast through all the work.
>
> I had taken Math 13, 23, 33 so I wouldn't be able to get an advanced diploma anyway. I am a little weak in the other courses. I could manage them, but I would have to struggle through them. I wanted to graduate with my friends.
>
> All my friends are really smart, and I wanted to keep up with them. No one put pressure on me. I put all the pressure on myself, but I wasn't doing very well in the advanced courses because I had so much trouble writing exams, so I switched. I am happier in the non-academic classes because there is less pressure to do well and I'm getting really high marks. I wish that I would have started grade 10 in the general courses.

Thus, it appears that regardless of the manner in which students chose the general route, either by a realistic assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses or by apparent coercion or stereotyping from others, self-esteem is a factor in keeping them motivated and involved in pursuing it.

Theme 2 - What's in it for me?

Most students reported being happy in their general diploma classes. They said that the work was easy to do, they had less homework than their academic friends, and they found the teachers pleasant and helpful. They thought that the atmosphere in the class was more relaxed, and that the teachers were more willing to take time to help explain things on an individual basis. The students also said that the teachers tended to be more relaxed and easier to get along with. Many said that they hate to do homework, and one of the best things about the general courses was that there was very little homework.

> I like all my general courses because they are not as hard as the advanced program. I don't have as much homework. I'm not use to doing homework a lot because I'm always doing something else that is more important.
>
> I enjoy most of the classes only because I know what I'm doing. If I were to switch to the advanced classes I would be straining myself and I wouldn't be happy. I have more time at home to do other things.
>
> If you have troubles with something, the teachers are willing to explain whatever they can whenever they can. The pace is slower so I have the opportunity to catch on to things. In the advanced classes the teachers don't explain as much because they expect you to know everything.
>
> My courses are good because they don't go into as much depth as the advanced courses, and I think that is good, especially with the courses that I have a hard time with.
>
> I find that in the general courses you can be lazier because there isn't as much pressure and people don't expect as much from you as they would in the advanced courses. I like these courses because they are not as hard to understand and there isn't as much work involved.
>
> The courses deal with more practical material that we would be more likely to use after school. You are mixed with people more your level of learning so you don't feel as stupid.
>
> It is easier to accomplish the assignments, I have spares and the classes are fun.
>
> If we set a goal to reach 60-70%, we know that we will have the chance to reach that goal. You have a better chance to get a job with a diploma than without one.
>
> I learn the basic things that I need to know, and I am not lost in the work. If a person isn't as smart as someone else, they will still be able to graduate.
>
> It keeps me in school and out of trouble, and it's a trial period. If I show that I can do the work, I can go into the advanced courses.

Some students are saying that they like the general program because they can understand the material and be successful. They like the fact that there is less pressure and stress associated with these classes as compared to the academic classes. These students have experienced difficulty in the past and appreciate that the pace is slower so they have the opportunity to keep up.

When I asked what kind of student would be happy in the general diploma courses, several of the students said "a person like me." Other students went on to qualify their responses in more detail: "one who is lazy, the type of person who wants a trade, someone who doesn't want to work as hard and wants to take things a little easier, a person who wants a job that doesn't need high marks or an advanced diploma, one who thinks they can't do very good, people who want to get their diploma quickly and get a job, an easy going student who just wants to finish school, a student who really has no cares for the future, a person whose first priority is not school but would like to make a decent living after graduation, one who doesn't like paper work, a student who has a lower standard of education, someone with a learning disability, someone with fewer goals, and a person who doesn't care for school.

Some students were more colorful in their descriptions: "a head banger- a person who has no goals", "any student because nobody likes lots of homework", "a person who is high on life and wants to take life easy because you only live once", and "just an average Joe who wants to come home to a half decent family and not worry about anything." Students who felt that they were happy in the general program were those who wanted to get through school by doing the least amount of work that they could.

The students feel that general diploma students are less ambitious and have lower expectations than students in the advanced route. They may be rationalizing to cover up for feelings of inadequacies in themselves. If they feel that they can't do any better, they may say that they don't want to do any better in order to protect their self-concept.

Some students felt that there were disadvantages associated with being in the general route such as the need to up-grade if they wanted to go to college or university and fewer employment opportunities. Some felt they were not being challenged enough and wanted harder work to do.

> Some of the courses are just plain Jane courses, and the teachers are too easy going.
>
> I do not like my general courses because my friends are all in the advanced route. This way I get bored and sometimes fall asleep.
>
> I might have to up-grade if I want to be something other than a mechanic.
>
> It is kind of too easy, and they are not really teaching what you need to know for the future.
>
> The only problem with this program is that you can't become a doctor or a lawyer because universities or colleges won't accept a non-academic student.
>
> I really regret that I won't have an advanced diploma.

The differing views among the students as to what they are getting out of the general diploma route illustrates the variety of abilities and student types in this route. While some students are very happy because they are able to understand the material and can work at a pace that is suitable for them, other students are bored because the pace is too slow or the work too easy. Teachers reported that the students who finished the work easily were often the ones who caused problems because they were bored and didn't have any thing to do. Maybe some of these students do not belong in the general program. They may have started out in this route because they wanted the easy way out, only to find out they need more of a challenge.

Theme 3 - We are not dumb.

Most general diploma students felt that they were not treated any differently by other students because they were in the general classes. As stated previously, this may be because the community is small enough that the students know each other well. Many have been with the same group of students since grade one. However, some students reported that they felt they were treated as dummies because they were in the general route. They felt that they were left out of the conversations that their academic friends were having, and that it was embarrassing to say they were in a general class. Once again, these feelings are associated with the student's self-esteem. Again, self-esteem is a crucial factor. The perception of self in the classroom and in terms of personal goals cannot be ignored in understanding the general diploma student. Having people call them names or feeling left out would contribute to the lower self-concept that many of these students have. Some try to cover up these feelings by saying that they don't care what others say.

> Some people say you can do better or you are never trying hard enough because you are not in the advanced classes.
>
> There are a lot of students that think that the general diploma is for stupid or slow people. I think that you should try to explain to students that it's not like that. It's at a level that we can understand, plus actually learn something.
>
> Sometimes we are classified as the dummies. When people ask you what course you are in it's a little embarrassing to say Math 24 when they are in Math 20.
>
> Some people in this school treat me as if I am dumb or something just because I am in the general courses, but I don't mind. I just do my best.
>
> The advanced students make the generalization that people are dumb if they are in a general program. We are treated a little different because we are not in the popular classes.
>
> Sometimes I feel kind of left out because when my friends talk about school, it's different than what I'm doing.

Although some of the students didn't like the treatment that they received from other students, all of the students felt they were treated very positively by the teachers. One of the main reasons that students seemed to be so satisfied with the general program in this school was because of the teachers. They appreciated the extra help that teachers were willing to give. It appears that the general diploma teachers make a real effort to help students feel good about themselves. Those who had been in the academic courses felt that general students were treated better than academic students. This may be because there is less pressure on the teacher as well as on the student to perform. Teachers are able to relax more and take the time to explain in greater detail.

> The teachers have lower expectations so if you find the work easy, you get lots of positive feedback which helps.
>
> We are treated better than the advanced students because the teachers are harder on them. I find the teachers are a lot easier to understand, and they take the time with you to make sure you understand. Whereas, I've found that in all the academic courses, they just expect you to understand.
>
> The teachers are really nice. They sit down and discuss whatever you don't understand with you.
>
> In the advanced courses they expect more from you and push a little bit harder.
>
> The teachers treat me and my fellow students like normal people. The teachers try to do their best to help. The general diploma teachers seem to have more patience and tolerance than those in the advanced courses.
>
> The teachers in this school are great. They try to push the idea that we are not stupid. They help me out a lot.
>
> The teachers don't care how dumb you are, all they care about is teaching and making the learning fun.

Both teachers and students comment on relationships. It appears that having a personal relationship with the teacher is very important to the general student. Teachers of general classes seem to have more time to develop these relationships than those of advanced classes. Taking the time to help individual students who are having problems helps to strengthen the relationship between the student and the teacher. It is the students' perception that the teachers have more time to help them than they do academic students. It may be that students who were previously in academic classes did not feel comfortable about asking the teacher for help. Asking for help when other students seemed to be having no problems may have been embarrassing. However, these same students may feel more comfortable asking for help in a general class because they know that other students are having the same problems. Teachers of academic classes may be just as helpful as those of general classes. It just may be the perceptions of the students that are different.

Theme 4 - Better things to do.

From my own experience teaching general diploma students, I knew that many often have part-time jobs or extra responsibilities at home that make it difficult for them to complete their school work. Some students chose the general diploma route because less homework is required, and they wanted to have the time to enjoy their outside pursuits. Besides having part-time jobs, sports, problems with their family, babysitting younger siblings, working on the farm, and socializing were among the reasons given for not getting their school work done. Homework was low on their priorities of things to do.

> I have a job after school babysitting. Plus, I write poetry, study motorcycles and old cars and I ride horses so I don't have much time for homework.
>
> I like my truck and soccer so it makes it hard to do my homework because sports come first.
>
> When school is out I go straight to work until 6:00 P.M. Then I go motorbiking the rest of the time.
>
> I have to babysit quite a bit because my parents are working most of the time. I have lots of chores to do. I play hockey in the fall and winter season just about every day.
>
> I don't have a job, but I have a big social life that takes up most of my time away from school.
>
> I have a part-time job, and I live on my own. I have a little boy which makes it difficult for me to get my homework done.
>
> I run our farm as dad is always on the road. I help relatives with their farming. I'm heavily involved in clubs and I spend a lot of time with my girlfriend.
>
> It is difficult to get my homework done because I work at home, and I don't get along with my dad so I go to the arcade or go skiing or skating.
>
> I hardly have time for homework or, when I am done chores, I don't feel like it. For example, last night I had homework, and I had to get up at 5:30 A.M. to do it. When I get home at 4:45, I check the cows. When my dad comes from work, we eat supper, feed the cows and calves, milk the cows, feed the

> birds and usually have to help the baby calves be born or drink milk. Then we usually come in at 8:30. I have lunch and go to bed. I get up and check the cattle at 2:00 A.M. At 6:00 A.M. we go out to do the morning chores. So I don't do my homework.
>
> I spend my time making money so I can drive to school.
>
> I work at a job all weekend and work at home every night. This class is good because I don't have any homework.
>
> I spend all of my out of school time on beer, parties, pool and women. Who has time for homework?

General diploma students measure their self-worth by means other than achievement in school. Many have outside interests or responsibilities that are more important to them, such as social activities and employment. Holding a job or having an active social life is a way for them to improve their self-esteem. Another example of improving one's self-esteem is illustrated by the student who works so he/she can drive to school. Having a car is a status symbol, so working would be important to that student. If they can't attain status by getting high marks, they find other ways to do so.

Theme 5 - End of the track.

About half of the students who responded said they had no future plans or goals other than to graduate. This may help to explain why they are in the general route. Students taking the advanced route usually have some plans about what they want to do when they finish school because they have to know what courses to take to meet their long range plans. General students do not seem to have made the same commitments to their future. They are content to just get through school and then make a decision about what they want to do.

> I don't know what I want to become.
>
> To be honest, I don't have any future plans.
>
> I'm not sure what I should do when I'm done school, but I think being in the general route has made my choices smaller.

> I have never really thought about my future plans.
>
> I want to get a job, get married and start a family, but I'm not sure when or what job I want.

Other students had very definite plans about what they wanted to do when they finished school. Some had obviously thought about their future a great deal and had made plans that were suitable to their ability and interests. These students display a more mature outlook on their education, seeing it as a means to an end.

> I wish to be an air traffic controller. I need a general diploma and that is what I'm aiming for.
>
> I want to become a fire fighter and all I need is grade 12.
>
> When I'm done this semester, I plan on going to a school where I can improve my art and drama. I plan to take courses in drama and dance and to study theater arts. I am going to be a famous actress.
>
> I plan to get a job in road construction this summer, and help with the farming. Then in the winter, I plan to attend NAIT and take their five month butcher course. I would like to try to get on with Safeway. Eventually, I would like to run a feedlot and run a butcher shop together after I get some experience.
>
> A general diploma will get me through school and get me smart enough to manage a farm. It will also get me into Lakeland College or somewhere else where I can take agriculture and farm related courses. When I get out, I can be qualified for a farm related job.
>
> I want to get into Grant MacEwan College to take the child care program I want.

What I found surprising was the number of students who said they wanted to come back to school to up-grade so they could get their advanced diploma. There seems to be a myth that everyone should go to university, and a number of the general diploma students have bought into that myth. For example:

> I will have to return to school for up-grading to try to get my advanced diploma so I can enter university to get my degree in fine arts so I can write my poetry better and get it published.
>
> I hope to go on to university to get my teacher's diploma. I want to be a Physical Education teacher.
>
> My general diploma will help me to achieve an advanced diploma, and my advanced diploma will help me receive a university degree.

> I will have to up-grade because I want to be a paramedic and, in order to do so, I need an advanced diploma.
>
> I'm going to get a job and work for a while before I try getting into university.
>
> I want to be a lawyer so I'm going to have to go to university.

Setting such high goals reveals several things about these general diploma students. They do not seem to know what the requirements or standards are for getting into university and do not seem to realize that to attempt to go from general classes to classes that are accepted for university entrance is not easy. This may be related to their fragile self-esteem. They may not want to accept that they are unable to handle the advanced courses so they try to convince themselves that they will go to university.

REFLECTIONS ON TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDINGS

All of the teachers that were interviewed felt that general diploma classes were definitely "more difficult" to teach because the students were less motivated to work and there were more discipline problems. Despite these problems, half of the teachers enjoyed teaching general courses because they were a break from academic classes, there was less pressure, and the students were honest and could be fun to teach. Teachers felt that they had to become performers and be more creative in developing strategies that would keep the general students interested and help them learn. Most of the teachers felt that forming personal relationships with the students made the classes more enjoyable for both the students and the teachers. However, even teachers who liked teaching general classes felt that it would be too tiring and stressful to teach these classes all day. For them, the ideal situation would be a mix of general diploma and advanced diploma classes.

Teachers who disliked teaching general courses preferred students who were self-motivated, completed tasks on time, and displayed self-discipline in class. These teachers preferred the academic challenge of the advanced diploma classes and felt that it was difficult to reach students in the general diploma classes.

Students at this school reported being very satisfied with their general diploma classes. They felt that the material was at a level that they could understand and do well at, and the teachers were willing to help if the students were having problems. The majority felt that they were not treated any differently by either the teachers or the students because they were in the general diploma route.

Almost all of the students attributed being in the general diploma route to their own lack of skills or lack of effort. Only a few blamed someone else for making them take this route. Some students had tried the advanced route but switched to the general route after experiencing difficulty with the material. Many felt that it was better to do well in the general route than to struggle or fail in the advanced route. Self- concept and self-esteem are important issues for general diploma students. However, they tend to use other means such as employment or social activities rather than how well they do at school to measure their self-esteem.

Over half of the students who responded had no plans or goals for the future. The grade 10 students were the most undecided with the grade 11 and 12 students having more specific plans. Many students said they just wanted to complete the grade they were in before making any more plans. A number of the students who did have future goals felt that they would need to return to school to up-grade, expressing the desire to obtain an advanced diploma and go on to university.

What can we learn from all this? That diploma students are demanding to teach is obvious, but the obvious question arises. Why? Is it merely because these students have lower ability? My research has led me to a new understanding of these students and their precarious self-esteem. Possibly what I had intuitively believed at first about nurturing was still valid. Society, with its emphasis on the status of a university education, produces external pressures which a diploma student brings into the classroom. A contradictory desire both to do well but to be seen not to care too much for what society wants becomes part of the student's psyche. My research suggests that teachers who go beyond labels to get to know students as individuals, and teachers who are not overly troubled by losing control often enjoy these classes and the rewards they can provide to the teacher's own self-esteem.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEMING THE STORIES

INTRODUCTION

According to Aoki (1991, p.8), we have become so wrapped up in the objective meanings of everyday life that we have forgotten the lived meanings of our experiences. As teachers we have become so preoccupied with classroom management, lesson planning, effective teaching strategies, discipline techniques and student achievement, not to mention teacher evaluation and its attendant pressures and stress that we have neglected to listen to the voices from the classroom. The purpose of this study was to acknowledge these voices and gain a deeper insight into the experiences of general diploma students and their teachers.

> "Stories vary, of course, in the weight of the lived experience, but as long as a story is of human experience, in one way or another, they surface in the text as experienced themes. These themes become a threshold that may allow an unfolding into the deeper realms of lived meanings." (Aoki, 1991, p.9).

My intent for this chapter is to go beyond the surface of the stories that the teachers and students told me to try to uncover the meanings behind those stories. What are the participants really saying? What is the lived experience of a general diploma student? What is the lived experience of the teacher? As I read and re-read the data that I had collected from the observations, questionnaires, and interviews, general themes began to emerge.

I felt that the smaller themes in the teachers' stories centered around the general theme of "The Personal Touch." In teaching general diploma students, it seems that personal relationships are important, but teachers must also contend with a number of contradictions related to forming these relationships. There is a contradiction between developing personal relationships with the students while maintaining the appropriate student/teacher distance. How can the teacher adhere to all the academic requirements and expectations while trying to promote personal contacts that help to increase the students' self-esteem? Contradictions were also evident in classroom control. Some teachers liked being in complete control of the classroom at all times, while others were willing to give up some of their control in order to establish more personal relationships with the students.

The general diploma students experienced contradictions as well, the primary one arising from their choice of program route. Whether to choose the academic route or the general route was a major decision that caused many students a great deal of anxiety. Many students had future plans and goals of attending university or other post-secondary institutions, even though they were in a general program. Students also had contradicting commitments that resulted from their participation in outside activities that took away time from their school work. All of these smaller themes, I felt, related to the general theme of "Fragile Identities" because it seems that much of what general diploma students say and do is associated with developing and protecting their self-esteem.

TEACHERS' STORIES

Personal relationships or keeping a distance?

Several teachers gave examples of how they used anecdotes from their personal lives to enhance a concept they were teaching. These were teachers who felt comfortable enough with students to tell about their own personal experiences in order to establish more personal contact with the students. Others reported that they were not willing to answer any personal questions. Why is there such a difference among teachers? Is it as Aoki (1991) suggests that the stories that the teachers related were more about the teachers themselves than the act of teaching?

One of the teachers felt that if he answered any personal questions, the students would try to become too familiar which would result in "time off task." He preferred to keep a very cool, professional distance from the students which explains why he would prefer to teach the academic classes. The motivating factor for academic students is getting good grades. General students are motivated by other factors than marks, and they like to form more personal contacts with the teacher. This teacher is obviously not comfortable with personal contacts with the students which says something about him as a person. He may be a very private person normally, or he may have had experiences in the past where he felt that the students were becoming too personal, and he does not want the situation to be repeated. He may be worried about his own image as a teacher. Will the students still respect him and listen to him if he allows them to know him more personally?

The teacher who felt that she had to be on guard at all times because general students would make up stories that would make her look bad had obviously also had unpleasant experiences with these students in the past. She wanted to maintain a distance from these students to protect her own identity as a teacher. She also preferred to teach academic students because they did not require the more personal contact that general students seem to need. Again this teacher was concerned about her own image as a teacher.

On the other hand, several teachers enjoyed and actively encouraged personal contacts with students. They felt that the closer relationship helped them to be more effective with general students. These students have not always experienced success in the past, resulting in a lower self-esteem Teachers felt that it was crucial to boost the students' self-esteem in order to help them be successful academically. Students appreciated the teachers taking the time before class or outside of class to talk about their jobs, families, activities and interests. This indicated to the students that someone actually cared about them as people.

Many of these students do not come from very caring or supportive backgrounds, and many have been in trouble throughout their school experiences. McLaren (1980, p.110) points out that it is necessary to accept the student for who he/she is without letting the background of the student get in the way. Many of the teachers said the same thing. Forming a relationship with the teacher may be one of the only positive aspects in their lives.

Students are not the only ones to gain from this personal contact. Many teachers thrive on the positive feedback they get from general students. There are very few visible rewards in teaching, but several teachers told how much they like to have the students come back to visit them because this shows that they were able to reach that student in some way. Several teachers spoke about the honesty of expression of general students.

In the story about students bringing the teacher cookies, the teacher felt better about receiving cookies from general students because it was an honest expression of how they felt. The teacher wasn't sure of the exact intent when an academic student brought cookies. Was it because the student liked the teacher, or was it a bribe to get better grades? We all need positive feedback in order to feel good about ourselves, and general diploma students provide a great deal of that if they like the teacher. However, teachers want to know that these positive expressions are honest. Teachers felt slighted when academic students were no longer cordial to them once the course they were teaching them was completed. They felt that general students are more honest in their relationships because they will continue to be friendly long after the course is over. I think that what the teachers are really saying is that if they invest the time and energy to form relationships with the students, they want to be sure that the intentions of the students are honest. This is also a reason why teachers who do not like to get too personal would prefer to teach academic courses. Academic students do not expect the teacher to take such a personal interest in them, and most do not want to have personal relationships with the teacher.

What happens when the teacher in general classes tries to follow all the academic requirements and expectations while also trying to promote personal contact and enhance the student's self-esteem? Hardy and McMurray (1980, p.14) maintain that it is possible to improve students' perceptions of themselves by providing situations in which students can achieve success. The teachers that I had talked to had developed a number of strategies that allowed the students to be successful including relating the material to their everyday lives. Gregory and Smith (1987) point out that the prescribed curriculum often offers little time for exploring topics of interest. Should teachers stick to the required curriculum, or should they work at enhancing the student's self-concept? Most teachers felt that helping the students to increase their self-esteem was more important than following all of the requirements and expectations set out by the department of education. This does not mean that they did not follow the department guidelines at all. Instead several teachers tried to incorporate topics of interest to the students into the required materials.

Hardy and McMurray (1988) feel that success at school involves more than academic learning, and that it is important for schools to provide positive and successful experiences for students. They go on to say that the subject matter and curriculum should take second place to the importance of the teacher as a mature, caring model who provides a secure, friendly, and relaxed learning environment. From time to time, teachers should forget about the curriculum and do things for fun (Hardy and McMurray). The teachers who reported that they liked teaching general students agreed with this view. They thought that "how" they taught the classes was more important than "what" they taught. Although these teachers were satisfied with their teaching styles, they still expressed concern about what kind of evaluation they would receive from an administrator or school board official. Basically, these teachers are saying that they understand and agree with the concept that it is important for the students to be successful and feel good about themselves, but they are also concerned with their own image as a teacher. Thus, teachers of general diploma students must constantly deal with the contradictions of forming personal relationships or keeping a distance. This may help to explain why half of the teachers interviewed preferred to teach only academic students where personal relationships seem to be less important than the subject matter.

Contradictions of control

Several teachers told me stories about experiencing nightmares that related to class control. Even though these teachers had not experienced a situation in which a class was out of control, the nightmares occurred both during the school year and during the summer holiday. In other cases, teachers had experienced classes that were nearly out of control, which seemed like real-life nightmares to them. Obviously, classroom control is a factor that causes a great deal of concern for teachers, especially those of general diploma students. Teachers and administrators realize that there are usually more discipline problems within these classes, which makes them more difficult to control. Contradictions result when teachers must make decisions about how much control they are going to exercise in general classes. Some teachers insist on being in control at all times, and use the same methods they would use for academic classes. Other teachers adopt different discipline methods for general classes than for academic ones by giving up some of their control. Why do some teachers want to have strict control at all times? In looking beyond what these teachers were saying to explore the deeper meanings involved, I felt that image played a critical factor.

Teachers who required complete control of the classroom were the ones who strictly enforced class rules and homework completion, allowed few group activities and would not take students on field trips. They were also the ones who discouraged personal contact with the students. Gregory and Smith (1987, p.53) point out that while an authoritarian climate may be more productive in some cases, it also produces negative effects of aggression, hostility, and apathy. Some authoritarian teachers reported not being comfortable with general diploma students and preferred to teach the more academic classes. These teachers may be very concerned with how they look to others, especially administrators or evaluators. They are afraid of appearing to be out of control of the situation. But why are they afraid?

Maybe from some real or perceived situation in the past, they are afraid that being seen to be out of control will be a reflection on their teaching ability or personality. They may be afraid that they will be judged along with the type of students they are teaching. In some schools there are negative stigmas attached to teaching non-academic students creating competition between teachers to obtain the more advanced classes (Gamoran & Berends, 1987) which tends to produce an elitist atmosphere within the school. Gamoran and Berends found that the more experienced teachers and those regarded as more successful were assigned to the higher streams. Maintaining classroom control may be one way for teachers to prove themselves to the administration as "good" or "successful" teachers so they can teach the more advanced classes, which will add to the teacher's self-esteem.

In the school that I studied, teachers usually have a mixture of academic and non-academic classes so there didn't appear to be competition between teachers for the more advanced classes. However, some teachers reported that they felt there was less prestige involved in teaching general classes. In the academic classes, when the students do well, the teacher receives a certain amount of credit and satisfaction. Teachers felt they could achieve the same credit and satisfaction in general classes by keeping the students under control.

On the other hand, teachers who were willing to give up a little control achieved satisfaction by having more personal relationships with the students. Some teachers reported that allowing the students to break little rules made it easier to work with them. Much of their behavior is to gain attention, so if the teacher gave them a great deal of attention by talking to them about their personal lives, it was easier to keep them in control. When I observed these classes, I noticed that the teachers were very patient with the general students. Several students who had taken both academic and general courses from the same teacher remarked on how much more relaxed the teacher was with the general classes.

Switching one's discipline methods from class to class can be a concern for the teacher as well. Possibly being able to maintain the same discipline style all day is the reason some teachers preferred to teach only academic classes. It may also explain why some used the same style for both streams. Other teachers felt that the variety of classes provided them with a break. They felt that the general students could be fun to teach which is in direct contrast to a study by Byrne (1990) in which teachers reported that the high stream students were fun to teach. I think that teachers at this school who think that the general students are more fun to teach are not only worried less about control, but are also the ones willing to form more personal contacts with the students.

STUDENTS' STORIES

The Fragile Identity

Students entering high school must make a choice as to which program route they are going to take. Once chosen, there is very little movement between the streams, and what movement does occur is usually downward (Gamoran & Berends, 1987). Which ever choice the student makes will affect his/her self-esteem. If the more academic route is chosen and the student fails, the student's self-esteem will be lowered. Academic ability is linked to one's self-worth, so failure in school or the fear of failure can be translated into failure as a person (Hardy & McMurray, 1988). The student's self-esteem can also be adversely affected by choosing the general diploma stream. There is often a stigma attached to being in a lower stream class where students may be told in subtle ways that they are insignificant, or they may be subjected to ridicule from other students.

Most students in this study said they were influenced by teachers, parents, or counsellors to take the general route, but they attributed being in this stream to their own lack of ability or poor work habits. Farmer and Vispoel (1990, p.127) believe that an individual's attribution for past success or failure has important influences on future achievement outcomes. Students who have fallen into a state of learned helplessness have impaired performance and believe that failure is inevitable. However, those students who attributed their poorer academic results to themselves have a much better chance at success. Many said that they had not been very successful in the past and did not want to struggle in the more advanced courses. A way to improve their self-esteem was to do well in the general classes. To them, getting high marks in the general courses was much more satisfying than just passing in the academic classes.

Students learn early in their school lives ways of protecting their self-esteem. For many, survival in school depends on avoiding humiliation, loss of face, and criticism from teachers or parents (Martin, 1980). Smith (1989) contends that students hide behind masks as a subterfuge to protect themselves. In analyzing the data collected from the observations, interviews and questionnaires, I found a number of examples of students in the general courses covering up their insecurities with masks.

There were masks of super competence in which students felt that they were able to complete a more advanced program, but didn't want to do so. Several said they were going on to the advanced program once they had completed the general stream. In order to protect their self-concepts, these students said that they were capable of doing the work, but that it was a matter of choice for them. These students would experience a lowering of self-esteem when they realized that they were either incapable of or not willing to do the work necessary to pass the more advanced classes.

Another mask was one of helplessness. Some students said they were too dumb to take the advanced courses. This may be based on past experiences in which they felt stupid or were treated as dumb. Students who are slower to learn may often experience embarrassment, so they tell themselves they are dumb in order to protect themselves from further embarrassment if they fail again. They seem to be using this as an excuse for not trying at all. These students need to experience some success in their lives in order to improve their self-esteem. The slower-paced general diploma courses may allow them to do this.

The mask of the victim hid the insecurities of some of the students. These students felt that they did not have a choice in the selection of the stream that they were in, despite the fact that students at this school have the final say in which stream they will enter. They did not attribute their poor grades or poor work habits to themselves, but instead blamed others for their failings. Skaalvik (1990) found that students attempt to protect or enhance their self-esteem by taking credit for success while denying responsibility for failures. This was evident among the students who blamed someone else for their being in the general stream. These students could not admit, even to themselves, that they were responsible for their own outcomes. One of the factors that leads to success for general students is accepting responsibility for their success or failure, and then making the best of the situation. It is possible that students who do not attribute failure to themselves may be neither successful nor satisfied in school until they can change the way that they look at themselves.

During my observations of the general diploma classes, I recognized many more students who fit into the descriptions of masks that Smith (1989) believes students hide behind. There were students who displayed characteristics associated with masks of: invisibility, class clown, boredom, apathy and contempt. In the teachers' descriptions of these classes, many referred to the same characteristics. Often general students are more prone to delinquency, absenteeism, social problems and dropping out of school (Slavin, 1990, p.473). Smith maintains that the students have learned to act in these ways in order to protect their self-esteem, but these masks interfere with the student's ability to learn. She feels that these masks can be removed when students reach a certain comfort level in the class.

Although the students in this study and the one conducted by Jackson (1968) said they were relatively satisfied with life in school, some of their other answers indicated that this was not always true. One of the students asked me to try to inform other students that general diploma students are not dumb, that they just learn at a different pace. This student has probably experienced situations in which other students have been critical of her because she is in the general stream. I have often heard students refer to these classes as the "dummy classes." Is it any wonder that students develop masks to hide behind in order to protect their self-esteem?

The comfort level for the students and the encouragement of the student's self-esteem is closely linked with the contradictions of control and of personal contacts that were expressed by the teachers. Although students said they could learn in a strict atmosphere, they reported being happier in the classes where the teachers took the time to get to know them as individuals. They sensed that the teachers felt that teaching was more than a job, and they appreciated the more relaxed atmosphere. Because of their poor self-esteem, general diploma students need teachers who provide lots of encouragement and who nurture their self-esteem.

Better Things to Do.

Engagement in academic learning for general diploma students is influenced by the extent to which receiving a diploma has personal or economic meaning to them (Sedlack, et al., 1986, p.19). General diploma students often rely on factors other than academic ability to assess their self-worth, having interests, activities and responsibilities that are more important to them than investing more time on school work. Students may compare the potential value for investing the time and energy into academic pursuits with the potential value of increasing their self-esteem through social activities or employment. They may seek the high school diploma credential rather than knowledge itself after reordering their priorities. Social activities and employment often receive a higher priority than school work.

Simmons and Wade (1984) found that low stream students expressed a desire to enjoy life to the fullest. The students in their study said they wanted to be able to enjoy life while they could. Several of the students in this study expressed the same desire. They were not concerned about their education, referring to feelings of detachment from what goes on in the classroom with the immediate concerns of their everyday life. They felt very little connection existed between the school subjects and their everyday lives. General students said that homework was a waste of time, and they saw the expectations of school competing with their activities or interests outside of school. Many said that they preferred general classes because there was little homework or the work was easy enough to be completed during class time.

Although the students didn't specifically say that they sought other means to improve their self-esteem, this is evident from the stories that they told. One student spent all of her out of school time working to make money to be able to drive to school. Having a car is a status symbol for any student, but for a general student, it adds to their feelings of prestige and self-worth. Working would be very important for the students who own cars and like to drive to school. Academic students receive status or prestige through good grades, but for general students other factors are more important to their self-concept. Some of these students are heavily involved in sports or have active social lives in order to prove that they can be successful in areas other than school work.

A number of students referred to their involvement in sports as a factor that prevented them from doing better in school. In our society, sports are a very important way to improve one's self-concept, especially for males. Every day young people can see sports figures on TV or read about them in the newspaper. Many of these sports heroes have a tremendous amount of status and prestige, but also may have only a minimum amount of formal education. For some students making the school team provides them with enough sense of self-worth that how well they do in school is not important.

Although only a few students mentioned that spending time with their boyfriend or girlfriend was more important than their school work, I have observed throughout the years of teaching these students, that they are very concerned about relations with the opposite sex. Some teachers told me that they spend the first ten or fifteen minutes of class on Monday morning allowing the students to talk about what went on during the weekend, so they are then able to get on with the planned lesson. General students tell some very wild tales about their weekend adventures, which is a part of building their self-esteem. There are usually more general students than academic students at this school that have steady relationships. The academic students may put off forming relationships in order to achieve their educational goals. Forming relationships, just like having a car, is a status symbol for general students. Again this indicates a need to boost their self-esteem and show that it doesn't matter how well they do in school.

Students may experience a lowering of self-esteem if they feel that teachers or parents are putting pressure on them to do well at school when all they want to do is enjoy themselves and look for other means to increase their self-esteem. I think that the students were saying that they wanted to be accepted for who they were, that they were valuable human beings even if they didn't do that well at school. Being employed, participating in sports or having a active social life were often the factors they chose to increase their self-esteem.

The University Myth

Students who have low self-esteem may set unrealistic goals for themselves that are either impossibly high or ridiculously low (Cohen & deBettencourt, 1991). In this study I found that although there were a few students who had clearly defined, reasonable goals, the majority of the students questioned either had no future plans or goals, or they had chosen careers that required a university education.

About half of the students that completed the questionnaire did not have any future plans or goals other than to finish the courses they were currently taking. This may help to explain why so many general diploma teachers said the students seem to lack motivation. It is difficult to motivate one's self unless there is an expected outcome to be reached. This lack of motivation may also provide an explanation of why these students are in the general stream. Academic students usually have definite plans or goals for their future which helps to motivate them to do well. It would seem reasonable that many grade ten students would be unsure of what they would do when they completed high school, but by the second semester of grade 12, most students have some idea of what they would like to do. The students without plans or goals were sometimes the minimally compliant ones who were willing to do only the minimum amount of work necessary to pass. However, many of the students who displayed discipline problems or absenteeism also reported having no future plans.

General diploma students are often anxious to get out of school as quickly as they can. What goes on in the classroom may seem irrelevant when compared to their everyday life outside of school. Several students expressed the concern that the courses they were taking would not help them to obtain a job. Others felt that the general program offered them practical skills that would be useful when they completed school. Many were interested in joining the work force as soon as possible. As Simmons and Wade (1984) note, getting a job is a normal and natural aspiration. A number of students had made plans that were suitable to their abilities, education level, and interests which indicated a more mature outlook on their education, seeing it as a means to an end. These may be students who have chosen to measure their self-esteem by criteria other than academic ability.

One thing that I found surprising was the number of students who expressed the desire to attend university. There seems to be a myth in our society that everyone should aspire to a university education. While that may be a realistic goal for some, for most general diploma students, going to university is an unreasonable expectation. General diploma students who propose professional career plans that involve a university education do not seem to realize what the requirements or standards are for getting into university. They also seem unaware that to attempt to go from general classes to advanced classes, especially in grade 12, is not easy.

An assault on the student's self-esteem may be caused by the pressure from family or friends to keep up the myth that they will go to university. I have found in the past that parents put a great deal of pressure on students to attend university to satisfy the parents' needs or improve the parents' self-esteem. Some of these parents are unfamiliar with the requirements involved and are unaware of the difficulty of obtaining university entrance after spending three years in the general stream. Parents often have dreams for their children that may be unrealistic, but the student may be unable to convince the parent of this. The students may be more realistic about their abilities but keep up the university myth to satisfy their parents.

Some of the students who had bought into the university myth in grade ten had reassessed their potential or abilities and decided to switch from the academic to the general stream by grade 12. They reported that they had been influenced either by their parents or friends to take the advanced route in grade 10, but found that they were having difficulty keeping up. Although their self-esteem may have been lowered somewhat when they first made the switch in streams, all reported being much happier in the general route. Kulik and Kulik (1984) noted that students seemed to like their school subjects more if they were in classes with students of similar abilities. The students who had switched felt that the courses moved at a pace that they could easily handle; they weren't embarrassed to ask questions in class, and their marks were much higher which contributed to improved self-esteem. It may be important to begin the counseling process in the junior high grades to help students choose the stream that is right for them based on their ability and interests. This may also be the time to dispel the university myth and promote the students' self-esteem so the general diploma stream can be a more rewarding experience for them.

REFLECTIONS ON THEMING

Both the teachers' stories and the students' stories indicate that the lived experience of the general diploma classroom is full of contradictions. But is this not the nature of life itself? We all have to deal with contradictions in our lives, and the classroom is not any different. Some students and teachers have been able to deal with the contradictions they encounter in the general diploma classroom more easily than others. Some feel that the experience is more rewarding than others, but it appears that self-esteem and identity play a big role in classroom interactions.

Teachers experienced contradictions between helping students increase their self-esteem and maintaining the proper teacher/student distance. Some teachers wondered about how much classroom control to give up in order to develop personal contact with the students. These teachers were not only afraid of losing control of the class, but also were concerned about their own identity as a teacher. How others saw them and evaluated them in their professional role was extremely important to them. Other teachers were less concerned with how others saw them, feeling that building relationships with general diploma students and giving up some classroom control were ways of providing a more rewarding experience for the students. Some of these teachers displayed enough self-confidence in their teaching methods and abilities that they were able to relate stories about losing and regaining control of particular classes. As I looked beyond the surface of the teachers' stories, I began to see evidence that supports Aoki's (1991) theory that the stories that teachers relate are more about the teachers themselves than the act of teaching. The stories that the teachers were telling me were not about general diploma students as much they were about the teacher's own search for an identity.

Beyond the surface of the students' stories were indications of the importance of protecting their fragile self-esteem. At first it appeared that the students were satisfied in their general diploma classes. However, as I really began to listen to these students, I began to see some of the masks that they were hiding behind to protect themselves. At the beginning of my research, the students asked me to find another way of referring to them besides as non-academic students. The label non-academic, itself, was damaging to their self-esteem. Many times the students expressed the desire to be accepted for who they are. This may be key in learning how to deal with these students.

Students hide behind masks in order to protect their self-esteem. Smith (1989) maintains that these masks interfere with the student's ability to learn, and they can only be removed when students reach a certain comfort level in the class. The stories that the students related tend to support this view. They reported that they were happier and felt that they could learn better in a relaxed atmosphere where the teacher took the time to establish personal relationships with them. Perhaps increasing the comfort level in the general diploma classroom for both the students and the teachers is an aspect to be considered.

CHAPTER SIX

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

This study was undertaken to explore the lived experiences of students and teachers in the high school general diploma stream. It arose out of concerns that I had based on my own experiences teaching general diploma students. Are we providing these students with a useful, quality education? Do we treat these students as if they were less important than those in the academic stream? Why do so many general diploma students drop out of school? While I did gain a much deeper insight into the experiences of students and their teachers, many of my original questions are still unanswered.

In this chapter I will provide an introspective and retrospective look at the experience of being a teacher/researcher conducting a study in a familiar setting. Based on the collected data and my interpretations of it, I have included implications for myself as a teacher, and for the role of the school in relation to future general diploma classes. Finally, I have outlined the proposed changes to the high school diploma program and the effect these changes may have on non-academic students and classes.

TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

Traditionally, educational research was something done to teachers by an "expert", often from a university or commissioned by government agencies who conducted research from a sociological, psychological, philosophical, or historical perspective (Burgess, 1985). This traditional type of social research treated teachers as objects to be studied and contributed to a gap between theory and practice. In more recent years, ethnographic research has gained popularity in education with the goal being to provide an indepth understanding of the classroom rather than to just gather experimental or statistical data that could be duplicated elsewhere (Bolster, 1983, p.305). The teacher as researcher has also become a more accepted role as it has become recognized that teachers need to be participants in the development of theories in order to make changes in their own practice.

Wishing to make changes in my own practice led me to undertake this study. Although I have not yet had the opportunity to make any changes, I have gained a far better understanding of general diploma classes from the perspectives of both the teachers and the students. I have also learned a great deal about myself as a teacher.

There are several advantages and disadvantages to conducting a study as a teacher/researcher. Spradley (1979) contends that strangers make the best informants when doing ethnographic research. While there may be some difficulties associated with collecting information from familiar respondents, I think that the benefits outweigh any problems that may occur. Spradley feels that if the researcher knows the participants too well, they may respond in a way they think the researcher wants them to respond. I agree that this can happen, but it is also true in any research interview situation whether the researcher knows the participants well or not.

Because I knew all of the participants, especially the teachers, so well, I feel that I was able to gather information that would have been unavailable to an outside researcher. Long before I arrived at the formal research stages, I had discussed my ideas with several colleagues. It was an area of interest to them, and they had the opportunity to provide input and offer suggestions from the beginning. As teachers, we are often asked to complete surveys or questionnaires related to some research project that we are unfamiliar with. Rarely do we see any results from these studies which make them meaningless for us. However, in this study, several of the teachers were interested from the beginning, and I met with them numerous times to discuss the progress of the research at the various stages. This would have been much more difficult to do if I had not already had professional and personal relationships established with these teachers.

The greatest benefit for the teachers and myself was having the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of our own practice through dialogue with another person. So much of teaching is done in isolation. Once the doors are closed and the classes begin, we know very little about what the others are doing. From time to time, teachers get together to talk about particular subjects or specific students, but rarely do we discuss what our experiences are like or take the time to tell each other our stories of teaching. The aspects of the research process that I found most satisfying were having the opportunity to both observe others teach and listen to the stories of teaching that others had to tell. I found that we had many experiences, hopes and fears in common, but we had never taken the time to relate these to each other. In this joint reflection we not only learned more about the topic of conversation, but more about each other as well. As Aoki (1991) maintains, we have become so wrapped up in the objective meanings of education that we have neglected to listen to the voices from the classroom.

The opportunity to tell their stories was the main benefit for the students as well. General diploma students often feel left out of the mainstream culture of the school because they have been made to feel less important than those in the advanced classes. They were delighted that someone was going to do a research study about them because it made them feel important. Before I administered the questionnaires, I gave a detailed description of my research project and the stages involved. I showed the students copies of theses completed by other researchers so they would have an idea of what I hoped to accomplish. For most of these students, a two or three page essay seems long so they were amazed that I planned to write so much about them. Whenever I was at the school to interview students or observe classes, students would ask me the progress of my "book." I was greatly encouraged by the interest the students displayed in my research study. It was a very rewarding experience for me to receive such a great deal of support from both the teachers and the students. All of this interest and support helped to inspire me when things were not going well, and I felt that I would never be finished.

Most researchers assume that people will respond honestly to questionnaires and inquiries (Simmons & Wade, 1984). I felt that, because of my familiarity with the participants, that they were more honest in their responses than they might have been with an outside researcher. Because both the students and the teachers had a stake in the research, they were willing to give me an extraordinary amount of time to complete the questionnaires or answer the questions. As Britzman (1991) points out, some interviews never end. Students and teachers would often add on to their stories or tell me new stories in informal chats we had after the formal interviews were over. During the four months that I spent in the school just observing classes and conducting interviews, I found that I needed to carry a notebook with me to write down ideas during these informal chats. Again, had I not been so familiar to the participants, I would not have been able to collect as much information.

During the first four months of my research I was teaching full time and doing course work at the university. There are definitely difficulties associated with being a teacher/researcher. Britzman (1991) noted that there is never enough time and as a teacher trying to do research; I found this to be true. When I started, I didn't realize how time consuming the whole research process can be. During the semester that I was teaching, I wanted to be a participant observer in the two general diploma classes that I was teaching. I had hoped that I would be able to observe the interactions in the classroom, listen to students' anecdotes and stories and record field notes on a regular basis. Before I started, I didn't think that these were unreasonable expectations. However, trying to do the research along with my regular teaching duties of preparing lessons, marking, contacting parents, completing report cards, participating in extra-curricular activities, attending department meetings and the other seemingly endless tasks that a teacher encounters every day made being a teacher/researcher more difficult than I had imagined.

I found that I was unable to record certain incidents as they happened because there was just too much going on. Instead, I had to write my field notes later when I had the time, relying on my memory of the event. I kept a research log in which I tried to record information each day. During the very busy times of the semester, such as the reporting period, I found that this was an impossible expectation so I wrote in my research log as often as I could. Britzman (1991) points out that it is impossible to tell everything, and I found this to be true. I eventually began to select what I felt was most important to my study and tried not to worry about any information that I was missing.

Once I was on a sabbatical leave from the school and enrolled at the university full-time, I did not experience the difficulties of time as much as I had during the first term. Because I had been working at my course work part-time for two and half years, I did not have a heavy course load and, therefore, had plenty of time to devote to my research. Normally, I would spend two or three days a week at the university and the other days at the school observing classes and interviewing. I conducted many informal interviews with both teachers and students by chatting to them in the halls or in the cafeteria. I feel that the information that I received in the informal chats was just as valuable as the information I collected in the formal interviews and questionnaires. I think that it was very important to my study that I had sufficient time to conduct these informal chats.

According to Vulliamy and Webb (1991, p.233), a case study provides the opportunity to gain an indepth understanding of a problem area but does not necessarily come up with a solution. I feel that this is the outcome of my research. I have a much better understanding of general diploma students and their teachers, but I do not have "solutions" to their problems. However, listening to the voices of others can help us to become better informed about what the school experience is like for them. Gaining a greater insight into the experiences of general diploma students may help me to relate better to these students. In the next section, I will outline some of the implications of this study for myself and for the school where I teach.

IMPLICATIONS

a) Implications for lower stream students in public high schools

Although labels can help us in defining particular problems, we need to be aware of the negative stigma attached to some of the labels we give general diploma students. I wasn't aware of how these students felt about being called non-academic until they told me at the early stages of my research that they did not like to be defined in terms of what they were not. They felt that being called non-academic produced negative images of their abilities. They wanted me to let other people know that they were not dumb, but that they just learned at a different rate. In the future, we should be more aware of the effect that language has on these students.

Language is an important issue with general students. Not only must we, as teachers, talk at a level that they can understand, we must be careful in the language we use to describe these students. Several teachers said they did not like to teach general students because they found it difficult to get to their level. Getting to their level is crucial if we want them to be successful and help enhance their self-esteem. If the teachers talk in language that the students cannot understand, that will only reinforce their insecurities.

b) Implications for general diploma students in Alberta

According to the Alberta Program of Studies, program rationale and philosophy for general diploma courses place the emphasis on the acquisition of practical life skills. However, Martin (1985b) feels that there isn't enough practical education that prepares students to join the labor force. He contends that there should be more coordination between school subjects and careers. The subject matter in general diploma courses should be geared more to the students' lives as this type of student responds best to things that relate to them and the world around them (Campbell, 1972; Gregory & Smith, 1987). Although teachers are limited to some extent by the constraints of the required curriculum, there is the opportunity in many subject areas to provide students with more practical knowledge that will be more relevant to their lives.

Changes in 1985 in the Secondary Education in Alberta policy led to the current General Diploma and Advanced Diploma. Concerns from the public that the general diploma is perceived as "second rate" and has low status have resulted in a proposal for a single high school diploma to beconsidered. The current proposal outlines a single high school diploma with specializations in areas such as: Career and Technology Studies, Fine Arts, Humanities, Science, Integrated Occupational Studies, and Second Languages. According to the proposal, students would have the opportunity to combine courses from two specializations, have increased opportunity to pursue studies in their interests and talents, and excellence would be recognized in any of the specializations. It is also suggested that a one diploma policy would decrease the stigma that has become associated with the general diploma stream.

Having a single diploma may seem like a method to get away from the stigma that has become attached to the general diploma, but regardless of what the diploma is called, there will still be academically distinct streams. Those students who wish to go to university will still be required to take specific courses, and those who want to enter the job market will still take the academically less difficult courses such as English 13/23/33. Changing the name of the diploma will do little to change how these classes are perceived. They will still be referred to as the non-academic classes, and there will still be negative perceptions of these classes and the students unless we make the effort to inform the students and the public that taking these courses and entering the job market are acceptable and reasonable aspirations. Although I have referred to the classes in this study as general diploma classes, most teachers, students and parents refer to them as non-academics. When I discuss my study with others, I often have to define general diploma students as "non-academics" in order for people to understand who I'm referring to. Just changing the name of the diploma will not change these perceptions.

c) Implications for the school where the research was conducted

There are a number of things that we can do at the school level to make the school experience more rewarding for general students and the teachers. Because a number of teachers said that they did not enjoy teaching general classes, I think that it is important to take teacher preferences into consideration when looking at teacher assignments. Dillon (1989, p.238) contends that teachers should endeavor to establish classroom environments which reduce resistance to learning and increase active participation in the lessons to help these students feel good about themselves and their ability to learn. This is a difficult task for teachers who do not like teaching general classes, so it is important to match the teacher's style with the class. On the other hand, teachers should not be expected to teach general classes all day as that can be too exhausting and demoralizing. Gamoran and Berends (1987) found that prolonged exposure to low-stream classes adversely affected a teacher's competence. Those teachers who reported that they enjoyed teaching general classes also said that they did not want to teach them all day. Unfortunately, this school does not have a large enough staff to allow teachers the opportunity to chose which classes they teach. One possibility is to work out a rotating schedule so the same teachers do not always have general classes if they do not enjoy teaching them.

Because the aspiration level for at-risk students seems to diminish with each year, it is necessary in dealing with at-risk students to intervene early enough and appropriately enough to prevent school disengagement (Cohen & deBettencourt, 1991, p.265). Many of these students show early warning signs in the junior high grades. As this is a junior/senior high school, it may be possible to recognize at-risk students or potential drop-outs while they are still in junior high. If we can not provide these students with adequate counselling, maybe the least we can do is make a start at enhancing their self-esteem.

Another area we should be concerned with at the junior high level is dispelling the university myth. We need to stress the importance of choosing a career that relates to one's interests and abilities, rather than trying to live up to what may be an unrealistic North American cultural goal of attending university. Not all students have to go to university. Getting a job upon graduation from high school is a reasonable goal. We need to work at increasing the student's self-esteem so that he/she feels comfortable with choosing an occupation that does not require a university education.

d) Implications for myself

The major intent of this study was to gain a deeper insight into the experiences of general diploma students in order to improve my own practice. I have found that many general students try to protect their fragile self-esteem by hiding behind masks. Smith (1989) feels that students have learned to act in certain ways to protect themselves, but these masks interfere with their ability to learn. According to Smith, the masks that students hide behind can only be removed when the students reach a certain comfort level in the class.

The students reported that they felt better about themselves and their school work in classes where the teachers took the time and effort to develop personal relationships with them. I have always tried to get to know the students on a personal level, but in the future, when I teach general classes, I will have to try to increase the personal contact with these students. They like to know that the teacher cares about them as a person, and that they are not just another face in the crowd. All this requires is a few minutes each day to listen to their stories about their work, hobbies or families. Campbell (1972) contends that if one really wants to learn about students and help them, it is necessary to get to know them.

Because self-esteem is strongly associated with success, a way to help nurture students' self-esteem is to look for their strengths by focusing on successes rather than failures. Success is important, but it cannot be artificially supplied by the teacher (Martin, 1980). Rather, it is necessary to provide situations in which the student can be successful. In the past I have used a number of teaching strategies that allow students to build on their strengths. The teachers suggested other strategies that I can incorporate into my teaching methods. When I am teaching general classes in the future, I will try to maintain the teaching strategies that I have found work well with these students, and also try to add those suggested by other teachers. I will worry less about the required curriculum and concentrate more on forming relationships with the students.

General students need lots of encouragement to help enhance their self-esteem. Students should be encouraged to make contributions to the class, but the teacher should not criticize a contribution that they make. Often it is necessary to overlook the language that they use in order to recognize their contribution. It is important also to recognize their achievements, even small ones. If we recognize the small achievements, the students may be encouraged to put in more effort to increase their achievement levels.

Recently, I accepted the position of assistant principal at the school where I have been teaching. This position increases the significance of this study for myself.

Having a better understanding of general diploma students should be useful to me in my role as an administrator. Because I know that these students are often more difficult to teach and need more personal attention from the teacher, I will try to keep classes as small as possible. When planning teacher assignments, I will attempt to take teacher preferences into consideration. When helping students to select program streams in high school, I will emphasize the importance of choosing a route that corresponds to their abilities, interests and goals. I will also try to advise some parents and students that attending university may be an unrealistic goal.

Although I have gained a much deeper insight into the lived experience of the general diploma classroom, there are still many questions to be answered regarding general diploma students. Instead of just changing the name of the classes, is there not something we can do so these classes and students are more highly regarded in the eyes of the public? How can we help teachers, students and parents realize the importance of accepting these students for who they are? Should we be trying to dispel the university myth? What can we do to protect and enhance the fragile identities of these students?

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APPENDIX 1

LETTER TO THE PRINCIPAL OF THE SCHOOL

August 26, 1991

Dear Mr. Brown:

During the next year, I will be working on a thesis as part of a Master of Education Degree at the University of Alberta. I would like to gather research data from the classes that I teach and other classes at this school.

I plan to do an ethnographic research study based on the experiences of non-academic students. Many non-academic students are unmotivated, lack positive reinforcement from home, have poor study habits and skills, have poor attendance, and display poor classroom behavior. It takes extra commitment and understanding on the part of teachers to deal with non-academic students. From this study, I hope to develop a better understanding of these students so that I can improve my own practice to make the education process a more positive experience for the students.

I will be using a variety of research methods to conduct this study. From September to December, 1991, I will be involved as a participant observer in the two non-academic classes that I will be teaching - English 23 and Social Studies 13. I plan to record observations of the classes, conduct formal and formal interviews, listen to personal anecdotes and stories from the students, and analyze some of their written work. From January to April, 1992, I would like to observe other non-academic classes, conduct informal and formal interviews with students, and interview staff members who have been involved in teaching non-academic students.

I will explain to the students and staff what my plans are before conducting any interviews and give them the option of participating in the research study or not. All information will be kept confidential. In the final written copy of the research study, I will summarize the information and make generalizations based on the data collected so that none of the students or staff will be identified.

I invite you to discuss the progress of the research with me at anytime and to read the drafts as they are completed.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to conduct my research at this school.

Yours truly,

Margaret Harris

APPENDIX 2

SAMPLE TEACHER INTERVIEW

The following interview sample is from the interview that was conducted with two teachers - Teacher A and Teacher E.

I - How do students in general diploma classes differ from those in advanced diploma classes that you have taught?

A - They have less self-control. They say exactly what comes to their mind. They don't brown-nose as much. They say what they think almost instantaneously to thinking it. They are fun, lots of fun, but they're also very demanding to teach.

I - In terms of control?

A - Yes, you have to learn to control them in different ways.

E - I find them less motivated.

I - In terms of learning?

E - Yes, in teaching a topic, these kids are more interested in the discussion that can go on around them. They get off topic alot rather than talking about what they are supposed to be doing. In a matric course, if I say I'm going to teach some type of principle, they are all listening to what I'm saying.

I - The matric students are interested in the subject matter?

E - Right, the non-academics are interested in talking about parties or what they did on the weekend. But they are fun to teach because they are spontaneous.

A - They want to know about their teachers' lives, and teachers that want to teach them have to be willing to reveal certain things. They are going to ask you blatantly. Kids in an academic program probably won't come right out and ask you something personal.

E - I know with my classes it is one of the ways that they get off topic. Sometimes it isn't even off topic because it becomes part of the examples that you use. The type of questions that they ask about the subject material leads to personal questions about the teacher.

A - But the academics wouldn't ask you the same questions, would they? They might talk about it outside of class, and they might wonder, but they wouldn't ask you.

E - No, they wouldn't ask.

A - They have more control whereas the non-academic kids are really up front about what they are thinking. If you allow them to be. If you don't allow them to be, that's when you get into discipline problems cause you don't allow them to be who they are. They do say what they are thinking, and that's something that I really like about them. You know where you are with them. Some of them have learned to hide what they think, but not as much as academics.

E - They are more concerned with the social aspects of their lives than the academics. In the academic stream you get so tired (I'm so glad that I teach some non-academics cause you get really tired) of kids who only care about marks. Some academic kids will do anything for the mark. In the non-academic classes if the kids like you, you know that they really like you. They are not just after your approval to get better marks.

A - Exactly. They are honest. They would never bring a teacher cookies just to get a mark. They bring a teacher cookies because they like them, and that makes me feel secure that it is real. I don't always feel that it is real when an academic brings me cookies.

E - They are more trustworthy too. Lots of academics will turn on you and cheat.

A - I've found that too. But they won't squeal on each other either. Whereas the academics, because everything is marks, they will turn on each other, they'll turn on you because the mark is everything. The non-academic kids will protect each other.

E - They will also protect you. If they like the teacher, they will be really protective of them. Just think of evaluations. When you are being evaluated in a non-academic class, they are with you. They will put their hands up. They will model the perfect behavior.

A - Right. They will go through all the hoops. I had a kid volunteer once who could hardly read, and I was being evaluated that day. He put up his hand to read, stumbled through it, and the evaluator was really impressed. He could hardly read, and yet he did it for me.

E - That can probably turn against you too. If they don't like you.

A - Oh, yeah. That's why you get certain kinds of teachers with a certain kind of personality that really goes with those kids. I would never give up teaching those kids. You get a lot back from teaching those kids. If you help them, especially get through a diploma exam, they will really like you. They like to succeed just as much as an academic kid, but the marks are not everything to them.

E - They do well so they can feel good about themselves. For the academic kids, good marks are just like stepping stones. I need this, so I can get this, so I can be a doctor or lawyer or get into university. That's another thing. Non-academics are not as goal oriented. They do not have as clear an idea where they are going.

I - Their long-range goal is to graduate?

E - Right. That's it. To get out.

A - On the other hand, most of the kids in the general diploma program are realistic about what they can do by the time they get to grade twelve. The say things like: "I've got a job." They work outside of school. Most of them know the real world. You know yourself that lots of kids come out with an academic diploma and just an academic diploma, not university entrance requirements, and they don't have a clue about working, how do resumes, references etc.

I - Is that what you teach them?

A - They all get CALM. They all should know it, but their goals are different when they are in school, like pass the course, get the high marks, but the non-academic kids are different. Most of them have jobs, or have had jobs since they were old enough to work. They have money like adults.

E - I find that too. They are more mature.

A - In that way.

E - They are more adult-like in that type of behavior than an academic.

A - They are more worldly.

I - Are your discipline methods any different with non-academics?

A - You don't have to discipline an academic class. The subject matter is the discipline. Once in a while they will get out of hand, but you can always bring an academic class back by saying: well, this is on the test, or this counts for marks.

E - There is no problem.

I - So what do you do for a non-academic class?

E - I find that it is almost like entertaining them. If you can let them talk, let them discuss things, and use what they say, bring in experiences from your life and theirs, you don't have discipline problems. You have to give them activities that they can do.

A - And also let them do little things. I let them break little rules. They appreciate that to no end. I let them sleep when they are tired. Not everyday, but you let them sleep when they are tired. If they come in looking really dragged out, and drift off to sleep, you let them sleep. You let them eat. They appreciate that to no end. They go tell other people: "We can eat and sleep in her class." They still do their work. You don't expect too much. You don't expect them to have their noses to the grindstone for eighty minutes like in an academic class. In an academic class, you try to squeeze in 82 minutes in an 80 minute block. There is go, go, go, pressure, pressure, pressure. In an non-academic class, you allow at least 15 minutes for discussion other than the activities.

E - Just getting started at the beginning of class takes longer. When the bell goes in an academic class, they are ready. They don't ask: "Can I go get my textbook?"

A - Or "I forgot something."

E - I keep pens in my desk, and I have never had a grade 12 academic student ask to borrow one. Well, I shouldn't say never, but rarely ask to use one. But I have at least six or seven kids in the non-academic classes ask for one each day. That takes time. You just kind of plan that things will take longer. They want to argue about who gets to take the attendance cards. Any reason to leave.

A - And you have to let some of that go. And you have to let them once in a while leave class. Sometimes you are going to get kids who are really hyper, and they can't work that way. So you have to have alternate arrangements. Sometimes if you want them to get their work done, you have to be really creative. I use storage rooms. Not as punishment. I'll say "Who wants to work in the hall today?" It's a treat, who gets to move their desk out and work in the hall. It's a lifesaver because some kids can't work around others. They get too hyper.

E - What they are trying to gain is attention. I'm thinking of someone trying to walk out of class. They don't want to leave class. Their intent isn't to sneak out. It is just one moment to have all the attention. I think of discipline. When does it get out of hand? I don't think that the academics could ever act like that. I don't know that I could ever allow them to.

A - You wouldn't get much done.

E - No.

A - Grade 12 non-academics are even easier than grade 11 or grade 10. You all have a common goal. I can remember teaching grade 11 and having what I thought were major discipline problems. I had them last block of the day, and they would climb out the windows. Usually I would say when it was five minutes until the bell: "O.K. let's get cleaned up and wait by the door, and you can all line up." We would stand and talk around the door, and it was summer so all the windows were open. Some of them climbed out the windows. So what I did was everyday I'd have them leave through the window. It was kind of hard on parts of the anatomy, but "O.K. Bob, you like leaving through the window?" "There it is. You don't go through the door any more." So you gotta keep your sense of humor, and not be worried about what an evaluator is going to think. Because you have to give them a kind of break, and let them be the boisterous people that they are. They are non-academic kids. They resist being forced.

E - That doesn't mean they are not being taught. It doesn't mean that it is all play time. If you let them do those kinds of things, they will work hard for you.

A - In those 50 or 60 minutes that you demand, they will work. Not always, and not every kid. Some kids you are going to get don't belong in school. It's not all fun and games because sometimes you have to get mad at them. Sometimes they do things cause they don't have self-control that are totally inappropriate. They know themselves that certain things they can't do. I don't think that non-academic kids would deliberately break anything or steal anything from me. They are loyal to me. If you teach them year after year, word gets around that you're O.K. The first semester that you teach those kids is crucial. You've got to decide: What am I going to let go? Who am I afraid of? Who am I trying to please here? It is not the intent to please the kids. It's just that you have got to get a relationship with them like: O.K., you do this for me, you work for me, and I'll let you eat. I'll let you sleep. You don't even have to say it. It's implied. Here's what we will do for each other. You have to spend a long time on climate building.

APPENDIX 3

SAMPLE INTERVIEW WITH A STUDENT

I - What made you go into the general diploma program?

S- I didn't start out in the general diploma program. I started grade 10 and 11 in the advanced diploma, but I had to switch to this one.

I - Why did you start out in the academic stream?

S - All my friends were really smart, and I wanted to keep up with them. We had been together through all the junior high grades, and I wanted to stay with them.

I - Did your parents put any pressure on you to take the more advanced courses?

S- No, my parents didn't put any pressure on me at all. There was some peer pressure from my friends to take the advanced courses so we could all be together, but even they didn't put too much pressure on me. I put more of the pressure on myself to try the advanced courses. I had to struggle to get passing grades in junior high, but I wanted to try the advanced courses. I thought that if I worked hard, I would be able to pass.

I - Why did you decide to switch from the advanced to the general?

S - I found the academic courses to be too hard for me. I had lots of trouble with the final exams, and I was really worried about the pressure of the diploma exams. I was struggling and putting pressure on myself, and I wasn't getting very good results. I was worried that I wouldn't get all of my credits, and I wouldn't be able to graduate with my friends. I didn't want to risk not being able to graduate with my friends so I decided to switch.

I - Are you happy with the switch?

S - I am happier in some ways. There is less pressure to do well, and I'm getting very high marks, for me. In some of the classes I have the highest marks. I think that is because I had to work so hard in the academic classes that I'm one of the few people that does my homework and studies for exams. I feel really good when I get good marks, but I also know that this work isn't very hard.

I - Are there things that you are unhappy about?

S - Yes. I'm not as close to the students in these classes because all of my friends are in the advanced classes. That is good in some ways because I have no one to talk to in class so I get a lot more work done.

I - Do you notice any difference between the students in these classes and those in the academic classes?

S - Sometimes the students in these classes bug me because they are so immature. They fool around a lot and don't want to do any work. That is hard on those of us who want to work. The teachers let them get away with more than in the academic classes because there is less pressure on the teachers to get through a lot of material. The students are wilder. They spit and throw things. Sometimes I can't believe the things that they do. I have had some of the same teachers for academic classes and general classes, and the teachers treat these students differently. They let them do things that they would never allow in an academic class. These classes are more fun though. The matric classes are more boring, and everyone seems so smart. The academics are not as willing to share. In these classes everyone helps each other out with homework assignments, but in the academic classes, the kids are not as willing to share. There is a lot more pressure in the academic classes. Nothing embarrasses the non-academic kids. They will do or say anything. These students do not seem to have a sense of what they want to do with their lives. All of my academic friends know what they want to do when they finish school.

I - Does being in the general diploma program affect your treatment in any way?

S - No, I don't think so. I still have my friends even if they are in different classes. I get along with everyone. We don't really think of being in advanced or general classes. Sometimes though I feel a little left out when they are all talking about something that happened in class, and I don't know what they were talking about because I wasn't there. The students in this school are pretty good. We have known each other for years so it doesn't matter what class you are in.

I - Are you treated any differently by the teachers?

S - The teachers in these classes are more patient. They are willing to sit down with you and take the time to help when you are having problems. In the advanced classes they expect you to be able to do things for yourself or know things already. The teachers let a lot more things go, but the classes are more fun and less boring than the advanced ones. The teachers treat us with respect. They don't make fun of us for being slower.

I - Will the general diploma help you to reach your future goals?

S - I don't know, but I do regret not having my advanced diploma. With an advanced diploma you have a lot more options. I really regret not being able to have my advanced diploma, but I didn't want to risk not being able to graduate with my friends. That was the most important thing to me. I don't know what I'll do now. Maybe I'll come back to upgrade so I can still get my advanced diploma.